

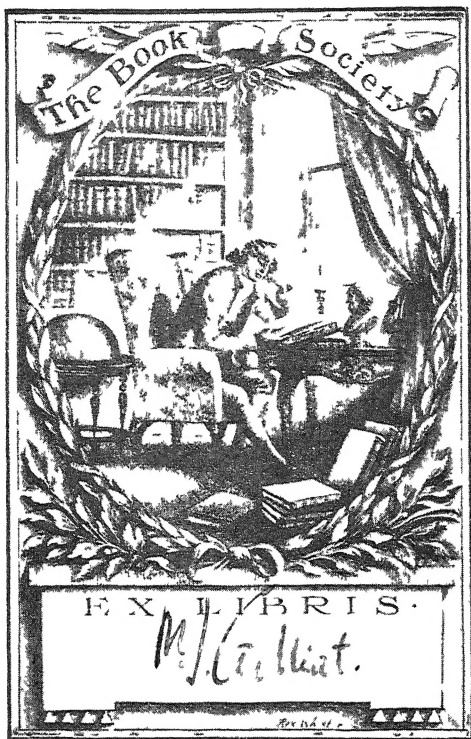
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*The House
by the
Sea*

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JON GODDEN



The House
by the
Sea



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There is a fish called a Hermit, that at a certain age gets into a dead fish's shell, and, like a hermit, dwells there alone, studying the wind and the weather; and so turns her shell that she makes it defend her from injuries that they would bring upon her.

ISAAC WALTON

PART
ONE

THE HOUSE WAS A FIRM WHITE SHAPE ON THE CHANGING COLOURS of the field. Under the canopy of cloud the light was very clean and pure; every detail of cliff and field and house stood out sharply; the pales of the fence, an oblong of red earth where the front garden was going to be, even the aerial on the roof. She put her parcels on the step and sat down on the stile to rest. 'How real it looks,' she thought. 'There it sits as large as life, complete to the last detail, as real as money can make it. But it's not surprising that it seems to me, for all its solidness, to be a dream. What is it after all except a dream come true?'

She heard Madge's voice saying, "Its cheaper if two live together, Edwina." What was it that had sent her to Madge, that had kept them together for fifteen years? 'Fear is an ugly word,' she thought. 'There are other words, such as expediency, habit, loneliness, affection, love. Madge: even the name has for me a hard bright sound.'

'At this moment,' she told herself, looking away from the house to the sea, 'I don't want to think about Madge, my dear friend Madge, but I must because the dream was not all my own.' She thought of Madge and saw, not the quiet spread of sea, but the two rooms in No. 11, a fifteen years' view of the same rooms or rooms just the same: the divan bed in the sitting-room, the breakfast tray, the gas fire, the London morning pressing against the window.

'I did my best,' she thought. 'I stood it as long as I could; Madge, four weary years of war, my illness, London. I took in as much of

the darkness and sorrow as I was capable of holding. Now I am no more use to anyone. I am finished. I am free.'

"Some day, one day, we will have a house in the country, by the sea, in Cornwall, of course," they had said. And she knew that one day it would have happened. Madge always had what she wanted. But whose house would it have been? 'Not mine,' she thought. 'To be invisible stand close to a bright light. The shadow of the sun is a cold place,' and, looking directly at the house on the cliff, she said aloud, "Mine, my own, mine," as if she were trying out a bar of unfamiliar music, words she had never used before. Then, because one thought led directly to another, and keeping her eyes on the house as if she were afraid it might suddenly disappear, she took a letter out of the pocket of her coat.

On the envelope in her father's writing was written, *For Edwina*. It had gone with her everywhere she went for over a year, ever since her fortieth birthday. Every day she read it, although she knew it by heart.

'But this is for the last time,' she told herself, unfolding the sheets of thick grey paper and opening them on her lap. 'Now something new has begun. From here I can go on by myself.'

Dear Edwina, my dear girl.

'Yes,' she thought, 'this letter was a lifeline, after twenty years of difficulties and being afraid, something circling down out of the sky when all hope had gone.' At the time of his death she wondered why her father had left her so badly off. 'I know now,' she thought, holding the letter. 'And I did my best, I tried, I fought—but I will not think of that now. Now I am out of that cold dragging sea, out in my own sun.' She bent her head to read the last words.

Be happy. I hope you will be happy with this money, for I love you very much.

For a moment her father's hand was in hers again as it had been when he died. She could not see the house—her eyes were full of

tears. 'But it is there,' she thought, 'my retreat, my hole, my shell. Now nothing can ever happen to me again.' And slowly she tore up the letter.

A rough track ran from the farm over the crest of the hill and over the stile to the fields and the house. The house was turned away from the village that lay over the hill. Although it was not half a mile away, the village of grey stone houses, the shop and the close suspicious people, were left far behind, sunk out of sight in the green valley. Beyond the house and the curving line of the cliffs she saw the sea, shining in the evening like a fish's tail.

It was cold on the stile, but she sat there a little longer. The evening colours deepened round her but the house shone against the sea; its white walls seemed to glow as if they held the last warmth of the sun, the last light; they shone across the fields to her like a beacon, a message.

She stood up and stretched out her arms as if they could draw the house across the fields and up against her breast. 'I love it already,' she thought, 'as if I had made it myself out of my own mind and body and heart.'

Now she was happy, happy. Even the cold evening air seemed to touch her gently. She felt lightheaded and a little giddy, as if she had been suddenly transported into a rarer, thinner, air. When she bent down to pick up her parcels the fields swung round her and the house tilted towards the sky, but she did not care. Now even the parcels could not make her think of the village. It did not matter that she had forgotten her shopping bag and that the meat had oozed on to her mackintosh through the newspaper, that Mrs. Buse had unwillingly given her the parcels nestled against her breast like an armful of parti-coloured puppies. She smiled down at them as she crossed the stile and the unfinished road on to the fields.

As she walked across the first field the house looked very far

away. It looked small and solitary and unprotected under the great pile of clouds. Suddenly and very clearly she remembered Madge saying, that last moment on the station platform, "I'm worried. I'm afraid you will never stand it there alone, you are much too nervous. You will be frightened to death at nights."

She put the thought quickly away into the back of her mind. Of course, Madge would try and spoil it. She did not like to be left out of anything. "After the war, Ena," she had said, touching the breast of her new uniform with her long fingers, "we will be together again." That was another thought that would have to be faced some time, but it was always possible, she had found, to cover up one thought with another—to make some pleasant picture for herself, the more fanciful the better, that would hide for a time at any rate, anything uncomfortable or frightening. She was often surprised at the pictures she made for herself so easily. 'My money,' she now thought. 'My beautiful money,' and at once she saw a gold river flowing in a steady stream, as beautiful as a real river under the sunset. She smiled to herself as she hurried across the fields and down the short cut to the house.

"The house is mine to do as I like with," she told herself again. 'It is new and virgin. Of course I know that it was built four years ago and that old Mr. Stanton lived in it for a little while before he died. But that does not count. It has been empty for years and the wind and the salt air have poured through it, washed it clean, scoured it out, and left it high and dry and waiting for me. I will forget that it ever knew anyone but me. For me it is as new as if it had been built yesterday. I will keep everyone away until I have impressed myself on it and made it a part of myself.'

To think this gave her a feeling of power and strength that she had never had before. Again she felt a little giddy, perhaps from staring at the white walls so fixedly. 'The house is empty,' she thought, 'absolutely empty of feeling. A shell. It is nothing but

space defined by four walls. I am responsible for filling that space with thoughts and doings and feelings so that one day somebody will say, "This house has atmosphere." The walls,' she thought, 'are a good start, anyway. They are real and solid and they are mine.' The word 'mine' made her warm and happy. 'It is one of the important words,' she thought, 'and always will be.'

'Why this passion for saying "My, my own, mine?"' she wondered, staring at the house. 'And why do we delight in enclosing a fraction of space with brick or concrete or wood and then in putting a lid on it and crawling inside to say "Now I am at home?"' The earth is waiting outside; the pine branches are a scented and whispering roof; the bracken makes a new bed each night and each morning a fresh world is spread for opening eyes.' For a moment she saw herself in ragged skirts and gold ear-rings lying in a gypsy bed with only a torn blanket stretched between the dark ground and the moon. 'But no,' she thought, 'each one of us carries round a shell which is his own and no one else's. "This is mine," we say, and like dull snails ignore the earth and pull the shell down over our heads and turn round cosily inside. "Let the wind have the earth," we say. "Our shell for us."'

She looked from the house to the clouds that now covered all the sky. 'Of course,' she thought, 'there is always the weather, that really explains it.' She hurried across the last field and, as she touched her gate, she thought, 'I will call my house "The Seashell."'

II

When Edwina opened the door the hall was full of chalky blue light which came through the staircase window across the white banisters and on to the slate floor. Although she had spent the last three days in the house, unpacking, cleaning, and arranging her furniture, going back across the fields in the evening to her rooms

in the village, she now felt as if she were entering the house for the first time. It was, she felt, entirely unaware of her, entirely empty, altogether silent, without life or breath—in spite of the furniture she had arranged, the curtains she had hung, the fire laid ready in the grate, her clothes in the cupboard. She hesitated on the doorstep, almost afraid to go in and break the silence.

‘Everything must begin some time,’ she told herself, ‘and there is always a small well of silence and of stillness round the moment of beginning. I want it to begin, don’t I?’

She slipped quickly into the house and closed the front door behind her. All the doors into the hall were closed and the narrow space was as cold as a well, but as she stood in the middle of the floor, looking up the turn of the staircase, she was suddenly warm with happiness and excitement. ‘Here I am at last,’ she told herself, ‘here, in my own house.’

The mahogany chest had come from the hall of the old house she had lived in as a child, and the rug, too, had belonged to her father but, in the niche she had managed to have made for her above the door, was Madge’s silver crucifix. They had bought it together in Florence many years ago and it had gone with them from room to room; it was as nearly familiar to her as her own hand. She turned her head away from it and saw Madge’s walking-stick with the agate head on the rack beside her own stick and umbrella; the stick was thin and smooth and highly polished, like Madge herself. “No, no,” she said aloud, but she piled her parcels, on the stairs and, picking up the stick, laid it in the bottom of the chest under her spare blankets. As she reached up for the crucifix she heard a faint echo of Madge’s voice saying, “Ena, be careful. Wait, Edwina,” but that did not stop her from lifting it down, wrapping it in her handkerchief, and putting it into the dark depths of the chest. Now the niche was nothing but a small white empty space. “That’s better,” she said as she picked up her parcels.

Her heels made a hollow ringing sound on the slate floor as she crossed the hall and went into the kitchen.

Her spaniel was in his basket under the table. When she left the house that afternoon to go down to the village shop she had shut him safely into the kitchen; she was afraid to let him loose on the cliffs and on the roads there was danger from cars. 'In the same way,' she thought, as she bent down to undo his chain, 'I decided this afternoon to wear my mackintosh.' She hated her mackintosh which was fawn and damp and cold, but of course she wore it because she was afraid of getting wet. The dog had looked at her sardonically when she tied him to the table leg, as if he were thinking, 'You do this for your sake, not for mine. I'm not afraid.' Now he turned his head away from her unforgivingly.

"James," she said, "a proper dog would have barked when he heard me at the door. How did you know who I was? You really must try and behave like a proper dog. No one must see anything out of the way about us, no one must guess—that would spoil it all. They must see only a middle-aged unmarried childless woman and her dog, her small quiet black spaniel."

'But who is there to see?' she thought, looking round the kitchen. 'I forget that Madge is not here to see what we do. We can do what we like. There is no one to see what we do together.' She bent over his basket and touched the domed black head.

'Where have you been all this long afternoon?' she cried silently to him. 'I didn't feel you in the house when I opened the door, the house was empty. Where have you been while you slept here in your basket? In what sunlight have you been racing and playing, what flowers have you picked? Let me come too. Don't leave me behind.'

The dog moved his head from under her hand. Very often he disappointed her. This, she saw, was not one of their moments. "Just as you like," she said aloud. "Be nothing then but dog."

"Out you go," she said, opening the back door. "Run along and lift your leg and scratch and sniff, and come back when you want to."

For a moment she felt hurt and a little depressed, but as she took off her gloves and laid them on the dresser, she forgot the dog. The house was waiting for her.

The kitchen was warm after the cold air of the fields. She stood in the middle of the room, leaning against the table. 'I am standing in the centre of the house,' she thought, and, as she stood there, she thought that she could feel the house closing in round her on all sides, settling round her. Through the window she could see the field, now growing grey and dim; as she looked at it the grass became colourless with twilight. The house was very quiet. She could hear the sea sounding a long way off and yet in her ear, as it sounds in a seashell. 'Yes,' she thought, smiling to herself, 'the Seashell, of course.'

As she relaxed more completely, letting her body sag against the table, she could hear only the clock ticking on the shelf like the even beating of a heart. 'The house is stirring,' she thought. 'All the separate parts and pieces that have gone to make the house are joining together, becoming one whole.' She could almost hear the bricks and mortar, the slates and pipes, the nails and paint and plaster, fusing together as if they had only been brought together yesterday. 'No one wanted the house before,' she thought. 'It was too lonely, too inconvenient. It is only now, because of me, that it has become a true house, a home.' The kitchen's yellow walls seemed to expand and contract round her. The clock's ticking grew louder and louder. A wave of happiness surged up in her as she thought, 'At this moment the house is born.'

A sound of scratching at the front door roused her. Moving stiffly, as if she had been standing by the table for a long time, she crossed the hall and opened the door; the dog sidled in and she shut it behind him and bolted it. He jumped up and touched her hand

but she looked at him absently. "Not now," she said to him. "You are too late with your greeting. Now you are only interrupting me—we have missed each other again."

Even in the empty hall she could feel the new life in the house. She put her hand on the chair rail as if she expected to feel a pulse in the wood. It was beginning to grow dark in the hall but, before she lit the lamp and only waiting to take off her mackintosh, she went from room to room, making sure that every window was shut and the curtains drawn. 'I must shut everything out,' she thought. 'Keep it close and warm.' Then, coming downstairs again, she took the first lamp from the row on the shelf under the stairs and, lighting it, went from room to room again, followed by the dog. In every doorway she stood for some time, holding the lamp high and looking round as if she were making an inventory.

First there is the sitting-room. A sitting-room is to sit in, a place in which to sit warm and safe close to the fire while the wind gets up outside. It is a sitting-room, that is to say, a space surrounded, set apart and private, in which it is safe to sit and rest. Outside the wind can tear at the branches and wild beasts can send out their own individual challenge and dangerous men can press against the doors but, inside, close to the fire, is safety and peace. The lamplight shows a cream-walled room and the chosen furnishings, the colours and shapes of the things gathered together for the comfort of body and mind, to please and rest the eye, to remind. The lamplight does not show them all, but she knows that they are there: the coloured backs of books, the prints from Florence, the peacock feather fan, the velvet cushions in the chair, the glass-sided clock on the mantelpiece. Yes, a sitting-room is still a place to sit in and, looking at the fire, to rest, let go, and be at peace. The hall is nothing much; it is only a place where doors open and a place for waiting. The stairs going up are more important; the white steps and the smooth red carpet lead to the high and secret places of the house. But a bedroom

is only a safe place to sleep in, it need be nothing more. Here the lamplight shows two quiet rooms, both the same size, with windows looking out at the sea, each with a bed, white and lonely, curtains that move easily in the wind, and a pot of hyacinths on the windowsills. Yes, here is a lonely safety—spaces of quiet set aside only for sleep. The lamplight shines across the landing into the bathroom, revealing for a moment the white shell of the bath, the shining oval of the lavatory seat and, turning on itself, descends the stairs, across the hall, into the kitchen. And here is the centre of the house, the core, the heart. All else can fade away if only this is left. It is not necessary to note the fine new Aga, the cupboards, the ringed plates gleaming on the dresser, the dog's basket under the table or the taps, hot and cold, in the scullery. The kitchen holds the breath of warmth and peace and safety. Here is home, here is life, here is the kitchen.

Edwina put the lamp down on the table; the inventory was complete.

'Yes,' she thought, 'complete and whole. Everything is here. Nothing is missing.' As she lifted her head she saw, not only the kitchen where she stood in the circle of light made by the lamp, but all the now darkening spaces of the house that stretched above and around her. It seemed to her that between her and the outside air there was now a world of deep convolutions and hidden spaces. She was held warm and safe in their innermost coil and heart. 'The secret inside of the shell,' she thought, and the shadowy walls of the kitchen curved over her, glowed with pearly warmth, flushed with deep changing colours.

From a long way off she heard the sea. The sigh and hush of rising and falling waves was in her ears and now the house was shrinking about her; it was again only the space of its four rooms. Beyond the frail walls and the light of her single lamp pressed the enormous dark sea of night.

She held her hands out quickly on each side of the lamp as if to shield it. "Hurry, Edwina," she said aloud. "One light is not enough."

The sound of her own voice roused her completely. 'Now, what am I doing standing here dreaming?' she asked herself. 'I have my supper to get and the lamps and the fire to light. This is my first evening in the house, and I must begin as I mean to go on, unhurriedly, regularly, everything in its proper place and in its proper order.'

'But dreaming,' she thought, as she picked up the box of matches and went into the hall, 'is the wrong word. I don't dream. My mind sinks, like a net, to another level and waits there, catching any fish that comes along.'

"Lamps," she said, lifting the lamps from their shelf in the stair cupboard and carrying them into the kitchen and lighting them one by one until the kitchen was a blaze of light and the table like a lit beacon or a funeral pyre. "Lamps give the best light, except perhaps, for the moon or candles. And to-night is a special night, a celebration. To-night I shall light them all. Here is grandfather lamp"; she carried it in both hands and put it on the table in the sitting-room. "And here is grandmother, a fine silver-coloured lamp that fits the standard and the buckram shade. And mother," she said, "stays here in the kitchen, and father, solid and made of brass, goes into the bracket in the hall. And their three offspring, all small, lamps in miniature, know their place in the scullery and landing and bathroom." She ran upstairs and down again. "For the bedrooms there are candles." She put the candlesticks and boxes of matches on the chest in the hall. 'Yes,' she thought, 'my lamp family has come alive again, and what a light they give—gold and rich and warm, and all turned inwards; not a thread of light to show outside, not a glimmer to betray us.' "I like my lamps," she said. "Whatever Madge says, I don't care if electricity never comes to the house." As she said this, standing in the hall, the door shook slightly and the hall

was filled with a cold ebb and flow. "One strong breath of wind coming under the door could blow them all out," she said, and now, for the first time, she heard the wind moving round the house.

In the sitting-room the lamplight fell on the gold curtains; it pleased her to see them hanging there as they had hung in the morning-room of her father's house. "How glad I am to see you all again," she said to them and to the oval-backed chairs and the gold-framed mirror above the bookshelves. "How glad I am that I kept you safely stored away with the rest of the furniture for all these years, although Madge has often pointed out to me that it was more than foolish and very expensive." She sighed and for a moment the room was dimmed as if a cold breath had touched it; then it was warm and safe again and glowing. 'How stupid I am,' she thought. 'That time is over.'

She knelt on the white hearthrug, a sheepskin, a little bald in one place, that had come from her father's surgery, and watched the flame catch first the paper and the sticks and then fall on the rocks of coal. The firelight turned her hands red and shone in the spaniel's eyes. "There my love," she said to him, looking down on his black head, "there, that's better." At the sound of her voice the dog came closer and leant against her knee as if he felt the moment had come for them to approach each other. That was how she translated his gradual coming closer and the relaxing of his taut black body over the curve of her knee. 'Or perhaps it is the fire he wants,' she thought 'and my knees are only a useful prop for him to lean against while he looks into the flames as he loves to do.' "But come," she said to him, "let us be simple and kind and close. To-night it is enough that you are my dog. I don't need to pretend that you are anything else—to-night I am too happy for that. Everything we need is here: peace, quiet, safety, a fire, supper, love."

She stroked his forehead and soft long ears. 'At this moment,' she thought, 'we are drawing nearer. By my hand on your head

we are joined. I know you and you know me.' "Do we know each other?" she asked him, turning his head so that she could see his eyes. "What is going on in your head, I wonder? Do I only pretend to know and must there always be a barrier between us, that cold line drawn long ago between animal and man?" His eyes were gold and clear; she could see deep into them a long way; they hid nothing and were warm with love. "Come," she said, "leap over the barrier into my arms." Her mind opened wide arms to receive him, but once again she knew that she had gone too far. He did not move his head but deep in the shining eyes, down, down, where she could never go, she glimpsed something cold and secret. "Wait," she pleaded. "This time I'm not trying to make you into something you are not. You hate that, I know. It makes you uneasy."

The dog moved his head away from her hand but she began again the smooth stroking along his back that he liked. 'It is always the same,' she thought. 'We approach, come closer and then, before we meet, we retreat. Very seldom do we attain any real communion. Must it always be like this? Surely with us it could be different? I know every hair on your body. Each pad and claw on your feet is familiar to me. I was present at your conception and your birth. Then why do you keep something hidden deep in you that I shall never know?' She could feel him withdrawing, stiffening against her. He turned his head to look first at the door and then at the windows. Suddenly his head became very still and poised, as if he were listening. She could feel the hair on his back rise slowly under her hand.

"No, I don't hear anything," she said, "and nor do you. You are only trying to change the subject."

The dog stood up and, giving her one cold glance, walked to the long windows and put his head down against the curtains.

"There is nothing there, I tell you," she said. "Nothing, except darkness," but he took no notice.

"That's enough," she said loudly, getting up from the hearthrug. "You come along with me and have your supper."

He followed her reluctantly, looking back over his shoulder at the window. In the hall he ran straight to the front door and listened again. "This is a silly sort of game to play," she told him, "and not the least interesting." At once he seemed to agree with her and, abandoning his idea, ran before her into the kitchen.

'No,' she thought, as she fetched his plate and began to prepare his food. 'We shall never know each other. The barrier is there, and it is too strong for us. Am I hurrying to put this meal before you as if to propitiate you? And is that why you sometimes come and lay your bone at my feet? Are we still opposed to each other?' Again she heard the wind moving restlessly round the house.

As she began to prepare her own supper she thought, 'As a household god, a dog-god made of gold or jade or carved from a black stone, you would be safer to own. Then I could burn a stick of incense before you for luck, leave you in your niche or on your altar and hurry away on my own business.' She smiled as she looked down at her sleek little dog eating his meal. "Really," she said, "how ridiculous I am."

She moved busily between the larder and the table, touching the familiar things, the plates and knives, the check cloth, the pie dish, a spoon. The kitchen was close and safe about her. The evening and the night were her own and the wind was only a harmless voice calling round her house.

Now everything was ready: the fire burned, the lamps shone, the table was laid, the evening meal was waiting in the Aga. The clock on the dresser showed her that it was only seven, seven o'clock of the first evening in her house. 'The time has come to do what I have been waiting to do all day,' she thought, 'what I have wanted to do for years. Now the time has come to know that I am really alone. Now at last I shall be myself.'

As she lit the candlesticks in the hall her hands trembled. "No," she said to the dog, "no, you can't come—not even you. Go back to your basket."

Carrying a candlestick in each hand she ran up the stairs lightly and eagerly, like a young girl.

III

It was cold in the bedroom. Cold thin air flowed through the closed windows and moved the curtains. The window-frames kept up a low continual rattle. The candlelight did not reach the corners of the room where the darkness had retreated, and every piece of furniture was outlined by its sullen watching shadow. The double-bed, in which her father and mother had slept, dominated the room with its heavy disapproving presence. Even the chairs and the faces of the cupboards wore an aloof unsympathetic air and the long mirror of the dressing-table was as blank and as unresponsive as a cold grey pond. But when the Beatrix stove was lit, casting a warm circle of light on to the blue rug and filling the room with a smell of hot iron and oil, the room took on a more cheerful air. And when the candles were reinforced by the steady light of the lamps from the landing, the room unbent completely. The frozen expanse of the counterpane seemed to melt a little at the edges and the printed flowers on the curtains to unfold and put out petals. The room slowly relaxed, became at ease, became bland and candid; it conveyed its readiness to look on with sympathy, even to connive with her a little; and when she locked the door it seemed to agree that it was the wisest thing to do.

In the built-in cupboards, the clothes were carefully arranged. She opened the doors to show them to the room; here were her underclothes, her knitted jumpers, and her shoes, all with low heels and wooden trees. Everything was good and solid; some of the

clothes were new. "You might as well use up your coupons now and get what you can," Madge had said. She opened the other door; here were the tweed coat and skirt and the camel-hair coat that Madge had chosen. She had never owned such expensive clothes before. She touched the shoulder of the tweed coat; it was severe and tailored; it would last for ever; it was Madge, not Edwina; it was not her idea of a coat at all.

She shut the cupboards and turned back to the room as if to tell it, "That is only the prologue. That is just to show you. Now the real performance will begin."

In the corner of the room was a square brown hat-box. It had belonged to her mother and was old fashioned and roomy with wire breast-shaped excrescences in the lid and sides to which hats had once been pinned like butterflies with long hat-pins through their hearts. This box she now dragged into the circle of light made by the stove. When the lid was opened waves of strong cheap scent came out, and sheets of tissue paper sprang up round her shoulders and fell on to the floor. Soon the room, the bed, the chairs, the floor, were strewn with clothing of a very different kind from the clothes in the cupboard. Here were chiffon slips and high-heeled velvet slippers, a green ostrich feather fan, a blouse made of pink chiffon frills, a handkerchief of cornelian silk patterned with cherry hearts, a black brassiere trimmed with pink bows. Under these were, among many other gaily-coloured garments, a sequin-covered jacket, a plaid coat, a dress of scarlet wool. Everything was soft and light and scented; nothing was new and nothing was expensive; some of the dresses were in fashion many years ago, but all had the look of things never worn.

When the box was empty she stood up slowly and looked round the room. The white walls swayed in the candlelight, the floor seemed to have sprouted all kinds of scented flowers, and even the furniture seemed softened and curved. She stood holding a pair of

puce suede gloves to her face. The suede was like a soft velvet tongue warmly licking her cheek.

"What is in that old hat-box of yours, Ena?" she whispered slyly to the room. "Nothing, Madge. Only some things of my mother's. Nothing, really, but I like to have it with me."

"What do you do with your money, Ena? You will never save anything at this rate." "It just seems to run away, Madge. I'm not clever with money, like you are."

She held the gloves across her face to hide a smile, as if Madge were in the room. She had not realized that the box held so much, nor could she remember buying that yellow silk bed-jacket—it must have been years and years ago. "Never mind, my dears," she said, "you can all come out and sun yourselves, there is no one to see us now."

Dropping the gloves on to a chair she straightened the mirror. Madge had said, "Whatever do you want with a mirror that size? What good will it be to you, Ena?" She had not answered, but she had kept the mirror.

'Is this Edwina?' she asked herself, looking into the mirror. 'Of course,' she answered, 'but which Edwina is it? There are, I know, so many.'

In the glass she saw a big colourless woman in a brown skirt and a high-necked blue sweater. The shoulders were square, the neck long and firm, the legs straight and big, like pillars. She lifted her head and straightened her shoulders as her father long ago had told her to do. "My girl," he had said, "don't be a fool—put your shoulders back, hold up your head, and don't be ashamed to show the world that you are shaped as a woman ought to be."

She put her hands behind her head and stared into the glass. 'Have we all,' she asked herself, 'even the assured ones, some secret consolation, some physical or mental vanity? Madge, I know, thinks of her slender ankles and the straightness of her back, but

what about the others? What about Flora Buse?' she thought, seeing the village shop again. 'What about that unpleasant little piece? But Flora, with her red curls and her girl's body, hard but ripe, like a grape, is all vanity. She does not need sustaining. What about someone like lame Gracie Buse? Does she buoy herself up, when she looks at her pretty sister, with her quickness with a ledger or the length of her sandy eyelashes? Buoyed up—that describes it exactly,' she thought. 'For years I have been kept from sinking by my one vanity. I have been like a swimmer upheld on a dark and difficult sea by an enormous pair of swimmer's wings.' She blushed at her thought, but she could not help smiling.

'But seriously,' she thought, 'standing here I look a fine figure of a woman. Anyone at a first glance, say from the window of a train just beginning to move, seeing me standing on the platform with my shoulders back and my head lifted, might say, "That's a fine figure of a woman." 'Yes, here is one Edwina,' she thought, 'and it's the falsest of all the Edwinas. The true Edwina is a small, shrinking, grey shape, darting from tree to tree.'

Directly she moved she gave herself away. She walked too quickly with her head bent and her shoulders rounded as if she were trying to make herself as small as possible. She knew that all her movements had a blind sort of clumsiness and that she was always putting up a large hand to feel if her bun of hair were still in place, or pulling her skirt down over her big knees, or touching the buttons on her blouse to make sure that they were still fastened. Now she sighed and bent forward to look into her reflected face. The forehead was white and broad and unlined, the nose long and a little crooked, the lips so soft and indefinite that the mouth was almost without shape. The eyes, she knew, seldom looked straight at anyone, and, when they did, as she now forced them to look in the glass, they lifted into a desperate blue stare that was rather repellent. 'And the hair,' she thought, 'doesn't match the rest. It is soft and

fair, like the hair on a little girl's head.' At once she saw another Edwina, a pale child in a pinafore and black-strapped shoes. Almost at once she was gone and in the glass a young girl stood waiting: a tall fair quiet girl, as empty and pale as a shell.

"Where have they gone to all these Edwinas?" she asked the room. "What have I done with them? Where is Edwina, the working girl, the secretary to the West End dentist? I have never believed much in her. She always seemed to me unreal as she trotted up and down the staircase of the Harley Street house in her white overall and black court shoes; she was only a makeshift, a poor excuse, for the trained nurse I should have been. And where is Madge Selby's friend Edwina, who was someone safe to talk to, a pair of hands useful to stroke a headache away or to wash out a pair of silk stockings? Where is the shy and clumsy Edwina who worked every evening in the Canteen? Where is that poor, ill, ashamed Edwina, the Edwina of the nursing home? It is better not to think about her. Where is the Edwina at the seaside, an almost forgotten happier Edwina, holding a towel over her breasts while her long legs hurried to hide themselves in the sea? What have I done with all these Edwinas? Can they all be here in this forty-one-year-old woman in the glass?"

It seemed to her that there was nothing in the glass except a tweed skirt and a blue sweater that might have belonged to Madge. "But now," she said to the room, "you will see me at last. We are alone, and I can discard these false selves. Now we will see a new Edwina."

She turned away and took off her clothes, from habit, folding each garment carefully and putting it on the chair. When she turned back again she saw a pale thing, unknown, unloved, very strange to her standing in the glass. She stared at it, her mouth a little open. Her hair, as it so easily did, had come undone and fell round her shoulders. The head with the flushed cheeks and astonished eyes looked very young: she knew it, but the heavy pallid body was

that of a stranger. For a moment it was there, exposed and defenceless in the glass, then one hand went up across the breasts and the other moved to rest lower down, in the classical gesture of virginity. As the hands moved, the glass took on a beauty that surprised her. 'I have seen that somewhere before,' she thought, looking at the loose hair, the spread of the hands, the long flow of the arms and the pale feet pressed together. 'Yes, in a picture. But there should be a shell for the feet to stand on, someone holding out a pink cloak, and, for background, little rippling blue sea waves.'

She moved and her naked legs, strangely dividing like scissors, embarrassed her. She turned away and picked up the nearest clothes.

Now a new series of Edwinas appeared in the glass. Each was gravely inspected, submitted to the room's approval, and dismissed with the appropriate gesture: a girl with long hair wearing a short summer dress; a tall woman in a satin dressing-gown, her hair covered by a crimson turban; someone in a plaid coat and purple lip-sticked mouth; a large person in pink silk knickers and a lace brassiere. The room became very warm. The flowers on the curtains hung limply; the mirror was covered with a fine sweat. But still these new notions appeared in the glass. Each was different, but each was a new Edwina. They came and went in the glass for as long as she chose. . . .

At last she paused and sat down on the stool, wearing her familiar dressing-gown and resting her cheek on her hand. Her arms and back were aching. 'I have enjoyed that,' she thought. 'It has been a treat. I feel released, free.'

But as she sat there, looking at the untidy room and the candles flickering in their white china stands, the excitement slowly left her. The flush went from her cheeks and the elation from her mind. She thought, 'For years I have been filled with Madge and before that there was someone else, who, I can't remember, and before

that another—my father, Jenny my nursemaid. I take on the colour of the person nearest me, just as I have taken on the colour and character of all these clothes in turn. Yes, a change of clothes is enough to change me completely.'

'What shall I do now that I am alone?' she thought. 'What shall I become? An empty shell waits for any tide to flow and fill it. That is asking for trouble. That is dangerous.'

Standing up she stretched her arms above her head and yawned. She saw, from the clock on the table beside her bed, that it was past eight. 'I am hungry,' she told herself. 'I have been up here too long, and I have let it all run away with me. I will feel better when I have had my supper.'

But as she dressed herself quickly, putting on once more the tweed skirt and blue jumper, she saw one last Edwina standing for her in the distance. When she picked up the scattered clothes and put them back into the box this figure of a stooping gaunt old woman with a loose mouth and dangling ear-rings became very clear, but she refused to look at it. She shut the lid and pushed the box back against the wall, and when she stood up the figure was gone.

Blowing out the candles she went to the door and, holding the lamp, looked back at the room. The room was tidy, prim, colourless, itself again. Only the stove, turned low, still kept its circle of coloured heat.

IV

Downstairs in the kitchen nothing had changed. The dog looked at her sleepily from his basket, the check curtains hung over the closed window, the plates shone on the dresser, the red curled rug warmed the tiled floor, her chair stood waiting for her; the room was as she had left it, warm, safe, and whole; but, as she sat down and put the spoon into the pie-dish she had taken from the oven, she knew that nothing was the same.

The wind had risen. It came from the sea and, leaping across the fields, shook the house as a dog would shake a small white mouse it found crouching in its path. But the wind was safely outside; nothing of it penetrated into the kitchen except the noise it made as it whistled and called past the window and the back door. The house was well built; the wind, however hard it blew, could do nothing worse than claw off a slate or two or toss a chimney-pot into the air. As always happens when the wind is up outside, the house seemed smaller, closer, as if it had drawn in its head and hunched its shoulders. 'Or rather,' she thought, remembering its name, 'as if it had turned the hard back of the shell to the storm.' "Blow" it seemed to say to the wind, "rage and curse—all the merrier, all the cosier for us." 'No, it is not the wind,' she thought, looking round the kitchen. 'My shell is impervious. Nothing has come in.'

As she ate her supper she knew that she was listening and watching the quiet corners of the room. Presently she knew that something, a feeling, an atmosphere, a strangeness, was loose in the house. Before she had gone upstairs there had been only the house, the dog, and herself. The house had held them closely; there had been room for nothing else. But now something lay like a mist or an invisible gas between herself and the house. 'I haven't opened a window,' she thought. 'I have made no crack in the shell.'

'What did I do upstairs?' she asked herself suddenly. 'Surely nothing wrong? I only let myself be myself for a little. Everyone at some time or other feels the need to shut themselves in behind locked doors. There is always the secret gesture that must be made, and who knows what the snail does inside the shell, what changes take place, what convolutions, twistings and turnings?'

"Thank God," she said aloud, "no one can know."

For a moment her loneliness enclosed her in a perfect circle of peace, of stillness. The kitchen was again the untroubled, un-

touched, inside of the shell. But almost at once she knew that this was an illusion. She could see that the kitchen was stirring uneasily: faint tremors moved the curtains; even the air in the room was changed and disturbed.

'Perhaps it is the wind after all,' she thought, looking over her shoulder into the scullery. 'It sounds as if it were trying to get in.'

She stood up quickly and carried her plate and cup into the scullery. As she washed up she tried to think only of what she was doing; of the way the water spouted out of the taps into the basin; of her extravagance in using her precious fuel this first night in the house so that she could have as much hot water as she wanted to; of the way the blue-and-white plates, that had come from her nursery, with all the other things she had stored long ago, shone up from the water in the basin; of the mop with its head of woolly hair. She counted the red and blue lines on the drying cloths and tried to fix her mind on the way the Vim fell out of the little holes in the tin. But all the time she was listening. She was straining to hear what was not there to be heard.

"Oh, for goodness sake!" she said crossly. "Must I spoil everything?"

As she folded the tablecloth and put it into the drawer, she distinctly heard Madge's voice saying, "Edwina, you will never stand it there alone. You are much too nervous. You will be frightened to death at nights."

She slammed the drawer shut and turned to face the kitchen. The moment she had been avoiding all day had come. She could not put it off any longer. It was here. It was now.

'This will decide everything that is to happen,' she thought, standing in the kitchen with her head bent and her hands held tightly together. 'If I can get over this everything will be all right.'

'This has happened before,' she thought. 'I have lived through other moments like this one and the end has always been the same.'

She saw her life stretching behind her to her childhood as a road marked at intervals by milestones. She could tell by looking at the stones exactly which stretch of road she was on; each was engraved with the appropriate symbols, but they were all alike, like grave-stones. Each marked a lost moment.

As she began to walk up and down the kitchen floor, she saw those moments as confused scenes where the colours ran together and the details were mixed, as if she were seeing a film that was going too fast.

"I don't want to see," she said. "I don't want to remember. What good will it do now to see what might have been and what I have missed? That day in Florence, for instance. Why must I see the shadows of vine leaves on a white cloth, the bottle of wine in its straw cover, the used plates, and a man's hand, with red hair growing on the knuckles, stretched out to me between the glasses? What good can it do? Even now, after all these years, that hand still seems to me strange and frightening and impossible. How do I know that, even if I had not drawn back and behaved so stupidly that morning in Florence, it would ever have come to anything?"

She went to the window and stood there, holding the corner of the check curtain, while she felt again the old indecision and pain and regret. 'And why must I be forced to see my cold bedroom at home?' she asked herself. 'My room as it was on that unhappy day when I knew, whatever my father felt or said, that I would never go back to the stone passages, the echoing wards, Sister's voice, the smell of disinfectants—that I would never face the hospital again? Then why must I see so clearly, the snowflakes falling inexorably across the Cathedral spire, the striped wallpaper, the open trunk and the waiting piles of starched aprons and caps?'

She flung the curtain away from her and crossed the room to the table again, but still the scenes went with her. "Must I go back the whole length of this dreary road?" she said angrily. "Must I see even

the foolish unimportant things which no longer matter because they were so long ago? I don't want to see that afternoon at the school concert when I couldn't get over my stage fright. What importance can that ridiculous scene have now? But I have to see the stage and the looped curtains and Miss Green's neat head showing above the piano and myself in the wings, looking down at my embroidered cuffs and my black patent-leather shoes. I have to feel even the stiff bow rasping the back of my neck. I have to know once again, and with the same despair, that I can't move, that the song is imprisoned for ever in my throat, while the same chords are played over and over again and all round me mocking voices whisper: "This is our prize songster—no one can sing like our Edwina!" "

She put her hands up to her head, but now the scenes were slowing, growing clearer. The last that she saw, where the road began, was distinct in every detail, set apart from the others, complete and perfect—even to the shadows cast by the big gold sun of childhood.

The garden lies in the shadow of the high yellow walls, in the embrace of the plum trees; it is green, quiet, safe. The sun is on the Cathedral spire lifted like a finger into the sky, a finger that is always there, that says, "Be a good girl, Edwina. Say your prayers." The smell from the syringa bush is so strong and sweet that it is difficult to breathe: the white flowers open and shut their eyes at her, open and shut their eyes until she pauses in her playing and turns her back on them. Look, someone has forgotten to shut the door in the garden wall; for the first time it is open to the street; it swings in the summer breeze. The opening in the wall is new and strange. Through it she can see new colours in the sunlight, and she hears new sounds, not the sound of Jenny singing or of water falling from the fountain on to the lily leaves, but the sound of children playing, a ball bouncing on grass, a dog barking, horse's

hooves and the sound of wheels. The colours are dazzling, beautiful. The open door calls, "Come, Edwina." She stands by the door, still in the garden, with the sunshine falling on her feet. She wants to step across the doorway into the new colours. It is only one step, one step out of the garden. Her heart beats with joy and excitement. She opens her mouth to call, "Wait—I am coming." As she lifts her foot in the black strap shoe the Cathedral bells crash out together above her head. The air trembles and shakes with sound. Her world breaks into a thousand jangling pieces as she turns and runs and runs in search of her quiet garden, her safe close green garden.

As she lifted her head she could have sworn that there was a smell of syringa flowers in the kitchen.

"How clearly I see it," she said to the room in a wondering voice. "I had forgotten, but now I see. It began in that garden. That was the first time."

"But how absurd," she cried. "That was long ago. Then I was a small nervous child. Now, surely, I am another person?"

She moved her hands impatiently. "That is quite enough," she told herself. "It is always a mistake to remember the past. I must think of the present, of the future. I will think of the house."

She turned down the lamp and went into the hall. Here, more clearly than in the kitchen, she could feel the house. As she stood with her hand on the stair-rail, she could see up the stairs to the landing and back through the open doors into the kitchen and the sitting-room. The whole house was under her eye; but she knew that it was not only four rooms and a bathroom and a garage outside.

"You see," she whispered, "this house is more than other houses. Other houses are built to hold the lives of a family, of lovers, of children, but this house has to be everything to me. It is all I have."

"I must keep it safe," she thought, looking round the hall. "I must hide it away. Keep it shut in and private."

Although the wind was louder and she could hear rain beating

across the windows and on the door, she told herself that the house was as firm as a rock, as safe as a fortress.

"But there must be no treachery within," she said sternly to the hall. "All will be well if there is no doubting, no division amongst ourselves."

She took her hand from the stair-rail and turned the lamp in its bracket above the chest a little higher. "A road can have a turning," she said aloud to the hall. "Instead of a milestone surely I can see a signpost pointing in a new direction? Surely what has been before need not determine for ever what is to come? This is a new stretch of road with a different view, a different sky."

She went into the sitting-room and poked the fire and turned the lamps high and called the dog to come and sit beside her chair on the sheepskin which, from now on, was to be his evening place. Her chair was old and comfortable. Like the sheepskin it had come from her father's house, but not from the surgery; it had been one of the drawing-room chairs he had chosen for her mother, the mother who had died when she was born, and it had stood for years on the same spot on the green carpet with its back turned to the garden. It had gone with her to No. 11 and to all the other rooms and now, here it was, buttoned into its brown cover, receiving her like the old friend it was. The padded back knew the shape of her shoulders, the padded arms her elbows, and the seat, after years of her weight, bore her impression; it fitted her and would never do for anyone else. She sat down and looked round the room. Wherever she looked she saw an old friend, a shape, a colour, that she had known for years. They stood round her like a company of soldiers, of guards.

"Stand firmly, my dears," she said to them. "To-night is very important."

She took up her book from the table beside her chair and opened it on her lap. She was only pretending to read but anyone, seeing

her sitting there with her head back on the cushion and the fire shining on her crossed legs, would have thought that she was completely at ease and at home. The fire was making a brave deep noise like the roaring of a miniature lion. She was glad to hear it, because it shut out for a little the noise of the wind. The flames were a waving gold mane; warmth ran up and down her legs like the touch of light, well-padded little paws. 'What a friendly creature a fire is,' she thought. 'What a comfort.'

Her knitting was on the table beside her; she picked it up and laid it over the book on her lap. 'I am not in the mood for reading,' she thought. 'I can't concentrate—but knitting is a different matter.' The wool was warm and comforting to her hands. What was it her father had said long ago when he had first seen her sitting with the needles in her hands and the ball of wool on the carpet? (She must have been about ten years old and it was a scarf she was making, she remembered, a khaki scarf for a soldier of another war, following Jenny's instructions with much dropping of stitches and laborious passing of the wool round the needles.) "What is that you are at, my girl?" he had said. "Knitting! Don't you know that it's bad for the brain? It's a soporific, it's a drug. No daughter of mine shall waste her time doing what a machine could do far better. You drop that and go for a good walk, or read a book, or do some sums, or finish that Latin exercise I set you, or ask Cook to show you how to make a sauce. Good God—don't you know that the whole exciting world is waiting for you? Get into mischief, get into danger. Do anything but knit!" She smiled as her fingers found the needles. Even now she could not touch wool without feeling guilty, but she liked knitting; it soothed and quietened her to feel her fingers busy. 'Perhaps he would forgive me if he knew that it was a seaman's stocking I am making,' she thought. "But what am I thinking of?" she said aloud. "I finished the stockings days ago. This is a khaki pullover for Madge."

Her fingers were more clumsy than usual; the wool caught at her hands. 'I have never been much of a knitter,' she thought, 'and this evening I don't seem able to concentrate on anything. Madge is so particular, perhaps I had better leave this for another day.' She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and, reaching out to the table beside her chair, turned on the wireless for the evening news.

"Here is the news," said the familiar voice, and she felt comforted, as if Madge had stretched out a hand to her from the warmth of another sitting-room.

The wireless, in its polished grained wood case had come from the rooms in No. 11. Here it sat on the same small table and under it was the same piece of green baize that Madge had bought. But to-night, for some reason, it looked darker and smaller, and she had never noticed before that the pattern of the grain in the wood was like a pair of crossed fingers repeated over and over again. From the box there now came, instead of the smooth voice, mutterings and curses which sounded as if two voices were speaking at once to cover the weeping of a third. She frowned and turned a knob and spun a dial, but nothing came out of the wireless except rude cat-calls and hootings.

"There must be a storm about," she said to the dog. "Those noises are only atmospherics. They will stop in a minute."

She put her finger on a dial and the noises sank away. Music swelled into the room. Somewhere, someone was playing a waltz. The waltz was in the room, sounding as it would have done if the piano and the strings and the harp had been close beside her, or as it would have done if her room had become a shining swinging ballroom. She shut her eyes and saw silk skirts swinging in great arcs, rising, dipping, falling, following the course of the blue river while the violins sobbed and sang and in thickets of myrtle the nightingales, leaning shoulder to shoulder, sang too. The moonlight swooned with music, but still the silk skirts spun their circles,

rising, dipping, falling. She smiled happily and put her hand on the dog's head, but suddenly the music was snatched away and in its place a horrid little hammer went knock, knock, repeating again and again the same insistent tapping.

"That wretched Morse!" she said angrily, turning the dials. "I must try and get the music again. It shuts out everything else."

Beside her a confident voice said loudly, "The Red Army is advancing towards ——" and was gone abruptly. And now, when she turned the dials, the room was filled with incoherent sounds. Voices muttered, threatened, swelled into a roar which seemed to fill the whole house and sank into a low buzzing and whispering. The cat-calls and whistlings began again, far off at first, but coming nearer and nearer.

"Don't be afraid," she said to the dog. She could feel him shivering against her knee, but then he had never liked the wireless; she knew that he found it uncanny and that it made him uneasy. "It's nothing to be afraid of," she told him. "It's all coming out of this silly little box. Don't you mind it, James."

"It doesn't seem much use this evening," she said after a moment or two. "I don't think I can stand this noise much longer."

When she turned the wireless off her hands were trembling. The wind took up the sobbing and calling. It seemed to rush upon the house with a new fury. 'I don't suppose that this is really a storm,' she thought, listening to the windows rattling in their frames. 'No one could call this a real gale. The house is very exposed up here.'

The house was crouching in the fields between the sea and the sky. The night pressed down on it and rolled in upon it from the cliffs. 'But it isn't really lonely,' she thought. 'The village is only half a mile away and nearer still, down in the cove, are other houses and the coastguard station and a company of soldiers.' She tried to remember how many houses there were in the Cove and

on the slope of the cliffs, and the exact shape and look of the coastguard station. But she could not see them clearly. For all the help they were to her they might have been on the other side of the country or across the sea.

'I don't know what real loneliness is,' she told herself. 'I might, at this moment, be alone in a farm high up on the side of a mountain, in an isolated plantation bungalow, in a tent in the desert,' but, as she thought this, she knew that the house was the farm and the tent and the bungalow. It was also a besieged fortress, a stockade surrounded in the jungle, a cave lost in the woods. It was anywhere that was alone and threatened.

"There is no way in," she said, sitting straight in her chair and looking away from the windows at the fire. "The walls are strong, the windows are shut and the doors fastened. Nothing can get in."

She looked at the wireless. 'What about the voices and the music?' she thought. 'The walls didn't keep them out—they came, from everywhere, from anywhere, into the centre of the house. This box is an open door, a jagged breach in the walls. It is as I have said before, these walls are an illusion. The house is open to every air that blows.'

She stood up and faced the windows. "It's no use," she said aloud. "I am afraid."

The dog left his warm place by the fire and walked slowly round the room. He sniffed at the door and at the curtains over the windows. The hair on his neck and along his back began to rise.

'He is catching it from me,' she thought, watching him. 'There is nothing out there except wind and darkness and rain.'

She lifted her head as she heard the rain lashing the glass. 'The best thing I can do,' she told herself, 'is to go quickly upstairs, get into bed, pull the blankets over my head and go to sleep until to-morrow. It will be good to lie in bed and to listen to the rain and to know that the house is safe and warm round me.' But as she

listened to the wind she knew that the house was not as safe as it had been.

'There is something out there,' she thought suddenly. 'There is something dark and evil abroad in the fields. I can feel it. Now it is stumbling towards the house. It is coming nearer. There is no light to show it the way, but it is being drawn this way, into the house, as surely as it would be if I were standing in the open doorway with a lighted torch in my hand, calling, "This is the way. Come this way. Come here, come in!"'

"I mustn't be afraid," she said. "Fear is dangerous. It makes a space that must be filled. Quick! I must think of something, anything to fill that space."

She stood with her back to the fire, holding her hands together as if she were praying, and called on the house to help her. She tried to see the house as it would be under a fine summer morning with flowerbeds in the garden, a deck chair on the lawn, and before it the blue summer sea. Then she thought of piles of linen in the cupboard, all marked with her initials, of plates of food in the larder, or coals in the coalshed, of the look of red tiles under soap-suds, of all the small comfortable things. For a moment she thought she had succeeded. The house seemed to settle and coil round her. But the dog, standing with his nose pressed against the curtains, threw up his head and barked.

She took a step out into the room towards the windows, but as she moved, she knew that the years of her life were slipping from her as if those years had never been. The sound of bells was in her ears. She was going back where she now knew that she had been many times before in the dark and secret places of her mind and in her dreams. The walls were closing round her. The green quiet was waiting for her. She was back at the beginning, in the garden.

Edwina opened her eyes and saw her sitting-room. Nothing had changed, and yet she felt as weak and exhausted as she would have

done if she had fought her way to the house through a storm of rain and wind. "Here I am," she whispered. "I can't run away for ever. It has caught up with me at last—or has it always been waiting there on the road for me?" She looked round the room, amazed. Behind her the fire was warm on her legs. The curtains hung closely. Only the dog had moved.

As if she were watching a dog in a dream she saw him run from the door to the window and back to the door. The high ringing of the bells in her ears changed to a dull knocking sound. For some time she did not understand that the knocking was not in her head but in the house.

She lifted her head. Yes, something was knocking at her front door. As she listened she knew that she could lock and bolt the door, or she could open it, but there could be no keeping out of what must come in. The knocking drew her from the room into the hall.

The dog ran before her with waving tail and a low growl in his throat and that did not seem to her to be strange or contradictory. She only knew that something was knocking at her door and that she must cross the hall, push back the bolt, undo the chain, and let that something in.

PART
TWO

THE HALL WAS AS COLD AND STILL AS A POOL. IN THE WALL LAMP above the chest the flame was untroubled in its glass circle, but a cold breath came under the door and touched her ankles and the black-out curtain trembled down the length of its folds. Close beside her the knocking began again.

Edwina put her hand on the door and looked back at the hall. As the chain fell she looked up at the flower shape of the flame; there it shone, golden eternal; then it was gone, and wind and darkness tore through the house.

Something went past her into the hall. The door shut and the wind was cut off. In the complete and sudden silence she heard the iron bolt pushed home into its socket.

The darkness was like a long passage going on and on underground. She did not know where she was, but she thought that there were close dark walls round her and that a low dark roof was pressing down on her head, and there was a smell, sour and musty and sharp, the right smell for a cave. The wind was coming back. She could hear it a long way off at the end of the passage. It was not the wind. It was the sound of something breathing close beside her. Of course she had known for some time that she was not alone in the cave. Something had come into the house with the wind, pushing past her as the lights went out.

She began to move backwards away from the door and the sound of breathing. Her back touched something hard. She knew, almost at once, that it was the end of the banisters. Now she knew

that she was in the hall of the house. The blackness round her shifted and thinned. She thought that she could see the outline of the kitchen door, the shape of the chest and, beside it, a darker patch against the wall.

A narrow shaft of light was moving in the hall. It was a beam, a ray, coming from a single eye that shone across the hall half-way up the wall. The eye shut and the light went out. When it opened again it was larger, nearer. It was, of course, a torch. A circle of light moved across the floor, on to the rug, backwards and forwards, looking for something. She watched it coming nearer, getting warmer. It touched her foot, paused, and then the light ran up her legs and over her skirt, over her clenched hands and into her eyes. As she put her hands up over her face she distinctly heard across the hall a sigh, a letting go of held-in breath.

The light swung away from her face and she heard something heavy moving by the chest and a scraping sound. When she looked again she saw a warmer light and a huge shadow wavering across the hall. 'It is lighting the lamp,' she told herself, watching a pair of hands detach themselves from the shadow and move upwards.

The lamp was alive again in its bracket. The soft steady light shone on the plastered walls and on the old chest, on the head of her walking-stick and the handle of her umbrella, the colours of the rug, the grey stones of the floor. There was the hall, exactly as it had been, but now there was something else—a dark waiting shape and a head outlined by the gold light of the flame.

She saw the suitcase first, perhaps because it was near her on the rug. It was an ordinary brown suitcase with straps, the last thing that she expected to see. Then she saw the shoes; a man's shoes, not a clubfoot or the pads of a wild beast. They were brown and covered with mud and over them trousers hung in muddy folds. One foot, she saw, was held off the ground like the paw of a hurt dog. She looked up. The brim of the wet hat was turned down all the way

round. She saw a chin above a folded scarf, a hand in a yellow glove, opening and shutting and, under the hat brim, dark eyes watching her.

What she had expected to see in the hall she did not know, but it was not this tall figure, this man, wet through but conventionally dressed in a check overcoat, gloved and hatted and scarfed. Then she saw that, even in the dim light of the hall, the figure, in spite of the soaked and muddied clothes and the limp hat brim, had a lounging insolent grace that was vaguely familiar and yet foreign. 'I have seen your sort before,' she thought, and knew that the silence between them had gone on long enough. But the wide shoulders in the stained coat had a menacing air and she was still too afraid to speak.

She recognized the faint musty smell in the hall. 'Not a smell,' she thought, 'an effluvia, an emanation. I recognize it just as I would recognize a place where a fox has been. Ah, my fine fellow,' she thought, looking at him more closely and seeing the clenched hands, the taut set of the head, and the wary gleam of the eyes under the hat brim. 'You can't hide fear from me, I am an expert!'

Her own fear had gone. Before she knew what she was doing she said loudly, "It's all right now. You are quite safe. There is no one else in the house."

The shoulders straightened, the head went back, and the hand in the yellow glove touched the hat brim. 'Why did I say that?' she asked herself. 'What possessed me?' Now the hat was off. She could see a dark narrow head and the light shining on high cheek bones. He smiled and as she saw the flash of teeth in the dark face she was afraid again. The hat fell to the floor as if the cold fingers could not hold it a moment longer. The confident pose was gone and she knew that in a moment the whole figure, drawn up against the wall, would fall.

"You are hurt," she cried, hurrying to him and, as she put her

hand under his arm, she heard his breath coming in uneven heavy gasps as if he had been running.

She did not know how she managed to support his weight while she opened the sitting-room door or how they crossed the room to the fire. Afterwards, she found that her sleeve was soaking and she knew, as she stepped back from the armchair and looked down at him, that her whole body was trembling.

In the bright clear light of the sitting-room she saw him plainly. The overcoat and the trousers were caked with mud. The head rested helplessly on her cushion. The face was grey and exhausted, with a long scratch down one cheek. The lips were blue and the eyes shut. 'What have I done?' she thought, looking away from him at the room.

The room, she saw, was exactly as she had left it—warm, neat, undisturbed—her sitting-room. The warmth of the fire caressed them. Even the dog was back on the hearthrug as if he had never moved. The room reassured her. It seemed to say, "This is nothing unusual. This is quite as it should be. Welcome to our first guest. Don't stand there staring. Where are your manners, Edwina?"

'Brandy,' she thought, 'he is a terrible colour.'

There was a flask in the cupboard under the bookshelves. It had come from the pocket of Madge's car where it was always kept in case of accidents. "Thank goodness that I put it in this room," she thought, as she unscrewed the silver top. His head, as she put her hand under it, was wet and heavy and curiously warm. He drank, and the colour came at once into his face across the cheekbones. 'Why, he is only a boy,' she thought, looking down at him. He put his hand up and, closing the fingers over hers, tilted the flask until it was half empty. When she turned from putting the flask back into the cupboard she saw that he was trying to take off his wet overcoat. After a moment she bent down to help him and then carried the coat into the hall and put it on the chest. As she stood

in the hall she was not sure that she wanted to go back into the sitting-room. 'I could slip out without his hearing me,' she thought. 'I could run up to the Farm.'

She looked through the open door at the lighted room. 'Now is my chance,' she thought, and then, 'That would be ridiculous,' she told herself. 'Listen to the wind and the rain. It is blowing a gale. I wouldn't be able to stand up in the fields. Surely I am making a fuss about nothing.'

He was lying back in the armchair, just as she had left him, but, as she crossed the room, he sat up, and, taking a dark silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, wiped his face and wet hair. She noticed that he still wore the yellow gloves and that they were too big for him. He must have known that she was looking at the gloves because he took them off, looked at them intently, and, leaning forward so suddenly that he startled her, threw them on the fire.

"Why did you do that?" she cried as the smell of burning leather filled the room. Looking up at her he answered:

"They were dirty. They had blood on them." And looking down again he added, "Must have cut my hand."

She sat down in the chair on the other side of the fireplace. His hands were held out to the fire; there was no blood on them that she could see, but they were very dirty and the nails were black. The firelight, and perhaps the brandy, had turned his face red. She saw that he could not have shaved for several days—his upper lip and jaw looked quite dark.

"You'll know me again," he said.

His voice was slow and a little blurred, as if he were speaking with something in his mouth. She knew that she should recognize the faint and familiar accent, but she felt confused. She did not like his smile. It came so suddenly, such a flash of white. 'I have seen it before,' she thought. 'I know it. But where? Where have I seen that dark face before, that flash of teeth?' she asked herself.

She saw that he was waiting for her to answer him, but she could think of nothing to say. His presence in her room troubled her. When she was not looking at him she felt that he was larger than he really was. He made her feel breathless and confused as if the room had become too small for them both. It seemed to her that he was giving out a strong animal warmth, more overpowering than the heat of the fire. 'I mustn't be so absurd,' she told herself, 'he has only been in the room a few minutes. What do I know about him? Why don't I ask him straight out what he is doing here?' She glanced at him, saw that he was watching her, and looked quickly away again.

The dog was sitting on the hearthrug close to the other armchair. Never before had she known him approach a stranger. 'I had forgotten all about you,' she cried to him, silently. 'What are you doing and why are you staring as if you had never seen a man before? And, for that matter, where have you been all this time? Why didn't you bark or try to help me in any way? For shame—you must have run back and hidden before the door opened. I am surprised at you! Now, come here at once and sit by me and behave yourself.' She moved her hand, waving the dog to her side, but he took no notice and did not even turn his head. As she bent forward to call him sharply to her, she saw that there was something wrong, something distorted, about the feet in the muddy brown shoes on the hearthrug.

"I had forgotten that you had hurt yourself," she said, getting up and pushing her chair back. "Your ankle is terribly swollen. What have you been doing to get yourself into such a state?"

She saw that she had said the wrong thing. He scowled up at her, but she took no notice. "You let me look at your foot at once," she said in the assured voice she had often heard her father use. "You must be in great pain. You don't want to be lame for months, do you?"

"Carry on then," he said, turning his head away from her, "but be careful what you are doing. I have had about all I can stand."

She knelt on the sheepskin and undid the laces and slowly eased the shoe from the swollen foot. He drew his breath in sharply and leant forward as if he were going to knock her hands away. But she said, "Sit still. It's got to be done, and I won't hurt you more than I can help," and was surprised at the authority in her voice. Under the fawn wool sock the foot was swollen and blue; she took it on to her lap and touched it with assured fingers.

"This is something that needs me," she thought. "I know about this. With this I am altogether at ease and at home. Look, my fingers know what to do, they are cunning and careful, they will do nothing stupid and nothing unnecessary."

She put the foot down on a cushion and fetched a bowl of water from the kitchen, towels from the linen cupboard and her First Aid box from its place in the cupboard under the bookshelves. But it was not Edwina who ran up and downstairs so eagerly fetching these things. It was someone something the same shape and size but indistinct, unformed—a ghost in starched skirts and cap of someone who had never been, and when she knelt on the hearthrug again with all these things spread out and ready, and smelt the strong clean smell of spirit rising from the lotion in the bowl, it seemed to her that the room, too, had changed and that she was back in her father's surgery. She saw the sheepskin muddied by many feet on the floor in front of her father's desk, the leather-covered couch, the basin full of blue disinfectant, and the donkey's jawbone that he kept for a joke next the bottle of children's sweets on the mantelpiece. There, against the morning light in the curtainless window, was the rough silhouette of her father's head, and his voice said in her ear:

"Come on, my girl. Get a move on. You know what to do."

She took the foot tenderly on to her lap, and while her hands, of themselves, did the right things, neatly and expertly, she remem-

bered her father saying, after her first week in the surgery: "Yes, my girl, you will do. We will make a nurse of you one fine day. Yes, you should make a good nurse, and, I suspect, a fine wife and mother too. You have what some women have, God help them, a passion for self-sacrifice, for service."

Now she bent her head to hide the tears that had come into her eyes. For a moment the two rooms were equally real to her: they seemed to be superimposed, one on the other. She could see the yellow square of the surgery window, a corner of the white sheet on the couch, and, at the same time, the foot on her lap and her dog's black head close beside her against the leaping light of flames. Another voice was speaking above her head. It was asking hoarsely and anxiously:

"Is it broken? Say, it's not broken?"

"Oh no," she said, soothingly. "I don't think so. It's cut and bruised and badly sprained, and how you got as far as this I can't imagine."

She put the foot carefully on a cushioned stool and packed her scissors and bandages back into the box. "There, that will do until you can see a doctor," she said, getting to her feet.

"Doctor?" he said, sitting up in the chair. "Listen. I'm not seeing a doctor. You know what you're doing, I can tell that. Guess I've had a bit of luck finding a nurse waiting here for me."

"It is strange you should say that," she said. "I mean I was just thinking that I should have liked, that I should have been. . ." And then, as she stooped awkwardly and picked up the towels, she said, "But I am not a nurse."

As she turned away to carry the bowls and towels out of the room he caught hold of her skirt and, looking up into her face, said, "You've done fine so far. Now fetch me something to eat." He shook her skirt a little and said in a different tone of voice, "Listen. No joking. I have had nothing to eat for days."

She stared down at him. His eyes were very bright. They were not black, as she had thought, but a dark red brown; under them were deep marks of exhaustion. She did not like his hand on her skirt, but she was afraid to move. "I am sorry," she said at last. "I should have guessed—I shouldn't have given you all that brandy. I will see what I can find for you."

He did not let her go at once. He seemed to be considering something or trying to make up his mind. Then he sat back in the chair, sighed, and closed his eyes.

Leaving the sitting-room door open, she hurried into the kitchen. But once she was there, away from him, she stood by the table, forgetting what she had come for. 'I must be careful,' she thought.

"I couldn't help it," she said to the kitchen. "I had to let him in. No one could have turned a dog away on a night like this."

She took a tumbler from its place on the shelf and began to polish it absently. 'How stupid these expressions are,' she thought. 'A dog indeed! As if I could ever shut my door against a dog,' and she saw again her dog James sitting warmly on the hearthrug with the firelight shining through the fringes of his ears. 'Listen to the wind and the rain lashing the window,' she thought. 'What must it be like out there in the fields? On a night like this it would be difficult to refuse admittance to anything—to anything that walks or creeps or flies. It would be a sin to shut my door against any living thing. Even against a snake,' she told herself firmly, putting the glass back on the shelf. 'Even against a tiger.' As she thought this she imagined a long low tiger shape, with all its stripes gone pale with cold, slinking in through the door, and, leaving the wet prints of its enormous paws on her clean tiles, lying down in front of the Aga after giving her a grateful look from its yellow eyes. 'How ridiculous I am,' she told herself, but she could not help smiling as she thought, 'Yes, a tiger, a tiger-lily—something beautiful and strange.'

She went to the dresser and looked at her reflection in the little glass. Her hair was untidy and her long nose shone; her eyes were large and astonished. She touched her hot cheeks and smoothed her hair. "Seriously," she said, "something must be done." She looked round the kitchen as if it could help her.

The kitchen was not as warm as it had been. It felt as if a window were open somewhere, but the window was still shut. She knew that all the windows in the house were fastened and that the doors were locked, but a cold draught was in the room; the faint eddying and flowing of cold air in the room went on. 'The house is moving like the surface of a pool after a stone has been thrown into the water,' she thought. 'The ripples are spreading out from the centre of the disturbance. But it will not last. Soon the pool will be bland and smooth again and there will be nothing to show that the stone was thrown.'

"There," she said aloud. "That is it exactly. I am making a fuss about nothing. Unfortunately it looks as if it will be necessary for him to stay here this night, there is nothing else to be done, but to-morrow he will be gone and that will be the end of it. Now I must give him his food and then find out, calmly and collectedly, who he is and where he comes from."

She put a large tray on the table. Now she was caught in the current of excitement that was flowing through the house. Her hands could not move fast enough to please her. 'Quick!' she told herself. 'Hurry!' As she spread a clean cloth on the tray she said, "The cold pie from the larder, and the cold potatoes, the bread, the knife and fork and mustard." Her feet, anyway, moved like wings, swooping easily across the kitchen. But the Aga would not be hurried over the heating of a saucepan of soup. It took its own time as if everything were as usual. 'At last,' she thought, putting the covered plate on the tray, 'now all is ready.'

As she pushed the kitchen door open with her knee she saw, over

the loaded tray, a dark heap lying on the hall rug. For a second she did not know what it was and the tray shook in her hands. Then she saw that the overcoat had fallen from the chest. The kitchen door closed behind her and now that she was standing in the cautious light of the hall, there no longer seemed any need to hurry. She put the tray down on the chest and picked up the coat. When she held it up the shoulders still kept their square shape, the skirts swept the floor; from the tweed came a rough, damp smell.

She did not like the coat. 'The tweed is good,' she thought, 'if the checks are too large. It is, perhaps, a bit flashy, but it is not cheap.' She turned it round, running her hand down the material, fingering the buttons, as if it had something to tell her. She looked at the lining and the tailor's tab was where she thought it would be. She read: 'Bulstrode. Norwich.' 'That does not give much away,' she thought, 'but I am sure he is not English. With that accent he must at least have lived for years in America or Canada.' In the pockets were a box of matches, and a small black torch. Her fingers shrank from the coat but she did not want to put it down. 'There is something about it I ought to see,' she thought, 'something I ought to know. Clothes generally give something away, some indication of the kind of person they belong to. Although that is not always true,' she thought, remembering her own clothes. 'But this coat is not right. It is a hybrid sort of coat for one thing, neither town nor country. It ought to be made of rough frieze, corduroy, or if it really means to be a town coat, of blue serge with a black collar, black with a tight waist.' "No, no," she whispered suddenly, "of course, it should be khaki."

She shivered. It was cold in the hall, cold and misty, and the smell of the wet tweed rose round her in a cloud. She looked up from the coat and saw that the staircase was in deep shadow and that the landing was in darkness at the top of the stairs. She flung the cupboard open and hurriedly hung the coat on the peg beside

her mackintosh. When the door shut on the coat the hall seemed itself again. As she picked up the tray she thought vaguely, 'Of course, it was too big.'

He was sitting in the chair with his eyes closed, just as she had left him. At first she thought that he was asleep but, as she put the tray down on a chair and began to put up the flap of the gate-legged table, she saw that his eyes were not quite shut and that he was watching her. At once she remembered that she was large and clumsy. Her hands seemed to have forgotten that they were hands at all. 'From the time they take to set up the table and the way they spill the soup and upset the salt they might,' she thought miserably, 'be the paws of some animal.' She could not remember feeling so awkward and uneasy since she was a schoolgirl. When at last she had finished she sat down and hid her hands in her lap. She wanted to say, "Begin with the soup and eat slowly because you have had nothing for a long time," but she could not say a word. Watching him out of the corner of her eye she saw that he had given up his pretence of being asleep and was pulling his chair nearer to the table. He was not looking at her. Perhaps he had noticed nothing. He seemed to be thinking only of his food. After a few moments she forgot herself in the pleasure of watching him eat.

'Why is it so good to see the food you have prepared eaten by someone else?' she wondered. 'Food takes trouble and time to prepare and no time at all to eat, yet the greater the appetite shown the greater the pleasure.' She watched the loaded fork moving between plate and mouth and thought: 'I have always liked to see living things enjoy their food. Fat old ladies at hotel tables, ducklings scooping in the mud with bills like little horn spoons, a child licking its fingers, piglets rooting and squealing, a calf pulling at the udder, the more refined attack of a cat on a saucer of milk—they are all a part of the same joy. Yes, it is good to be hungry and be satisfied. It is right.'

'But now,' she thought, 'as I watch him, for some reason or other, all these comfortable farmyard similies seem unsuitable. Nothing in the room has changed. When I look across the table I see nothing wild, nothing rude: the fingers hold knife and fork correctly, the napkin is spread on the knees, nothing drops on to the table or the floor. Then why do I suddenly think of a naked man gnawing a bone beside an open fire? Is it the muscle I can see moving in the cheek or the way the white teeth, although they are hidden behind the lips, work at the meat and bread that makes me think again of some wild beast, a tiger or a wolf?'

He looked up suddenly from his food. She did not have time to look away and she knew that he saw her thoughts showing on her face. She was surprised to see his suspicious surly expression change. Now he looked amused and a little smug as if he were saying to himself in a half-exasperated, half-pleased way, "Here we go again. I might have known it. For me all women are the same." His face became bland and smooth. It seemed to her that he was holding himself still for her inspection, allowing her to see what a handsome face it was.

'It is extraordinary what a difference food and warmth can make,' she thought, watching him as he rested his knife on the edge of his plate and took out of his pocket, first a silver cigarette case which he put back at once, and then a packet of cigarettes. 'Already he has forgotten that a moment or two ago he was at the end of his tether. Now he looks pleased and too sure of himself. Or am I imagining this? Is he only a self-conscious boy trying to appear at ease in a difficult situation? I am not making it easier for him, staring in this rude way.' But she still watched him from under her eyelashes; he lit a cigarette, sent the slow blue smoke out into the room, laid the cigarette down on the side of his plate with exaggeratedly slow movements, and then picked up his knife and fork again. As he began to eat she looked away.

'Well, I have seen you,' she thought, 'and still I have not made up my mind. Your face has had its effect on me but perhaps not quite the effect you are used to.' Looking quickly at him again she felt a little chilled. 'It is a much used face,' she thought. 'It must be useful to him. Many women must have seen it. But I have seen it when it was off its guard,' she told herself, 'before this fine smooth blind was pulled down. I have seen it lost and shaken and a little blurred with uncertainty. I have seen it lying quite defeated with the eyes shut. It will never be able to have its full effect on me.' This made her feel more confident. She lifted her head and stared openly at him.

He was lying back in the chair, smoking his cigarette. His hand was raised, lowered; it flicked a little ash on to the carpet. 'What is he?' she wondered, 'and where has he come from. I can see him lounging down a country road, or stripped to the waist wielding an axe in some great forest, or leaning against a post with a straw in his mouth whistling to the girls as they drive into the little one-horse town for their weekly shopping. But for that matter I can see him just as well walking with a townsman's smooth glide down tunnelled streets dark under the huge electric signs. I can see him looking sometimes rather frayed and shiny between the shoulders, sometimes obviously in money, but always with a broad-brimmed soft hat tilted over one eye and a cigarette between the teeth, and always alone while the streets grow darker and more dangerous round him. Dangerous . . . that is the word,' she thought, and then, sitting straight up in her chair, she said to herself, 'Why, what am I thinking of? I am half asleep.'

The room was warm and close and full of smoke and the smell of food. 'It is late,' she thought, looking at the clock on the mantel-piece. 'The time has come to ask some necessary questions.'

She stood up because she thought that she would be more sure of herself when she was looking down at him. As she glanced round

the room she was struck by the way the sitting-room seemed to have accepted the situation. It looked in some way more firmly established, more permanent; its colours seemed richer, its plan more certain; the armchair might have been made for him; in it he looked perfectly at home. 'And the dog, too, has accepted him,' she thought. 'Yes, James is pleased and excited. Look at the way his eyes are following every movement of the hands above him—he might never have seen anyone smoking before. His body is limp with pleasure as he leans against a knee that he does not know.' The dog's exaggerated posture annoyed her. 'Why is he doing it?' she thought. 'It is not as if any notice had been taken of him. He never leans against me like that except at rare and special moments.' 'Come here,' she called to the dog silently. 'Mine are the knees you should lean against. It is my hand you should know.' She knew that the dog had understood her because he turned his head and looked at her. His eyes said plainly, 'Leave me alone.'

The room and the dog had withdrawn from her when she needed them most; they were standing apart, ranged against her, and she thought that both were waiting to see what she would do. This betrayal hurt and confused her. She stood hesitating in the middle of the room and now she could not remember what she had meant to say. As she stood there it seemed to her that the house had never before seemed so small and insecure and frail. The wind laid a heavy hand on it, the night pressed close against it. She knew that it was quite alone and defenceless, surrounded and cut off by dark lonely fields and the sea. 'And now,' she thought distractedly, 'it is also divided against itself.' Her eyes went back to the man in the armchair and, as she saw the brown suit, the bandaged foot laid out on her cushion, the hand holding the cigarette, her fears were crystallized, made clear and hard and cold.

She took a desperate step forward and, leaning over the chair, said loudly, "What do you want here?"

His eyes opened wide, looked straight up into her face. He answered at once. "Somewhere to hide."

Now that the words were out and loose in the room she thought that they both breathed more easily, as if the air in the room had become lighter and warmer. Even her fear had become less hard, less pure; it was adulterated a little by curiosity. She found that she could ask, "Hide? What from?"

His eyes were considering her. She could almost see the thoughts racing behind them. They were taking in all the separate details of her appearance, and the brain behind them was adding these details up to make one sum, one whole. Then, as if he now knew the answer, he threw the cigarette into the fire and leaned forward.

"Listen," he said. "It's time you and I had a little talk. I'll ask the questions and you do the answering. Then we'll get on fine."

Obediently following the wave of his hand she sat down in the chair opposite him.

"Can I walk on that to-night?" he said, pointing to his bandaged foot.

She shook her head.

"Where is the nearest house? Got any neighbours?"

"Down in the Cove, a quarter of a mile away," she said. "Or the farm over the top of the hill. The village is a little further."

"You live here alone? No servants?"

"Quite alone," she said.

"What's this place?"

"What do you mean?" she said. "This is my house."

He moved his hand impatiently. "What's this part of the country called?" he said. "What's your address? Something more than 'My house, England, Europe,' that's about all I know?"

"The village is called St. Vail," she said. "This is Cornwall, of course."

"No of course about it," he said. "You would be surprised. Corn-

wall—that's the end. That's where the land ends. After that there's the sea. Next stop America!"

He laughed: "Very funny," he said, as if he were speaking to himself. "The hell of a joke." He turned to her again and lifted his hand. "But there's nothing to laugh about," he said. "You be careful or it won't be so funny for you."

To her surprise she heard herself saying, "Hush! Don't say anything else. There is no need."

She stood up and looked down at him, holding her hands tightly together. "It's not necessary, really it isn't," she said earnestly. "You will only be sorry later. And it's all quite simple. You are hurt and can't be moved even if it were possible on a night like this. I know that you must stop here for the night. Here is warmth and shelter. Let us leave it at that for to-night. Everything else can wait until to-morrow."

She did not know which were the right words to use, only that it was important to stop him from speaking. As she stood over him she could see the dark colour coming into his face and she knew that anger was rising in him like a tide. She thought that he was growing visibly thicker and distorted, and she knew, very clearly, that in another moment violence would be released in a flood through the house.

"I am going to get your room ready now," she said. "You must rest and let go. You are quite safe here with me."

She saw that she had succeeded for the moment. His hand sank back on the arm of the chair, his head dropped forward; now he seemed shrunken and limp in the brown suit. But as she moved he lifted his head to look at her again. His face was creased and blurred with exhaustion and she had to bend down to hear the words he said in a hoarse whisper.

"No funny business," he said. "No tricks. I'm watching you. I'll know." And then she saw that he was asleep.

She looked round the room triumphantly. Her hands were trembling. She felt lightheaded and faint as she put her hand up and touched her wet forehead. 'What an escape,' she thought, 'why, in another moment——'

But as she looked at his sleeping face the feeling of triumph left her. 'What have I been imagining?' she asked herself doubtfully. She felt bewildered and tired. 'What have they been doing to him?' she thought. 'I have never seen anyone so completely worn out and exhausted. I don't understand.' As she walked silently away she thought, 'His eyelashes are long and dark, like the lashes of a little boy.'

It did not take long to light the candles and to fetch the linen and the blankets from the cupboard for the bed in Madge's room. When she had finished, she carried the suitcase upstairs and put it on a chair. 'You need not do this,' she told herself. 'It is quite unnecessary,' but she knew that she wanted to unpack the suitcase.

The case was not locked. The lid sprang up willingly. Folded on the top was a dressing-gown made of thick red silk. The collar was worn and there was a stain of old toothpaste on the lapel. She did not like the dressing-gown; it made her think of hotel bedrooms and unmade beds in the mornings. She hung it quickly on a hook inside the door.

In the case was a yellow sweater, a pair of striped pyjamas, some clean underclothes, three pairs of socks, some handkerchiefs, and a folded map of the south of England. All these things were quite ordinary; she did not know what she had expected to see but they disappointed her. They were clean and not cheap, but as she turned them over she felt that they should have been different. 'They might belong to anyone,' she thought. At the bottom of the case were a pair of red slippers, a pair of brown suede shoes, both wrapped in newspapers, a sponge bag, a case of razors, two black-backed hair brushes and a bottle of hair lotion, and a carton of

cigarettes. She examined each of these things in turn. The brushes were marked with two silver initials: B.W. The comb was not very clean. The shoes had been mended. 'Why don't I like to touch these things?' she thought. 'They are what I should expect to find in a man's suitcase. Why do they make me uneasy? What is wrong with them?' The hair lotion had a strong smell. She wrinkled her nose as she put the stopper back. "Not a nice person," she murmured. "Not my sort at all."

As she knelt on the floor and closed the suitcase, her uneasiness changed to a feeling of sadness. Tears came into her eyes and she bent her head, overcome by a heavy impersonal sorrow. The room was cold and narrow, and the smell of the lotion persisted on the air like the smell of stale funeral wreaths.

"I must get out of here," she said, struggling to her feet, but she knew that she could not leave all these things lying on the bed and on the floor. They looked so forlorn, huddled untidily together, that she had to take them up one by one, and, trying not to look at them or to handle them more than was necessary, to arrange them in their proper places. As she put the razors on the dressing-table beside the black brushes she thought, 'I wonder why he didn't shave.'

When everything was tidy and arranged she looked round the room. The dressing-gown on the door, the brushes on the dressing-table, had changed it completely. "Just as well Madge can't see it now," she said aloud and turning the lamp up on the landing she went downstairs.

He was standing at the bottom of the stairs holding on to the banisters. In one hand was the walking-stick that he must have picked up from the rack. He held it as if it were a club and not a crutch. She stood still as she saw his face. He looked like another person—the smooth bland mask had gone. She saw his furious pain-twisted face with only one part of her mind; the other was busy with his eyes, still bright with sleep, the cheek marked by the

velvet cushion, the wild black rings of hair, and the crumpled tie half-way round his neck. She was not afraid of him, although she knew that he was dangerous. 'Just about as dangerous,' she thought, walking slowly down the stairs towards him, 'as a tiger disturbed in his sleeping-place.'

"Where have you been?" he said. "I know—you've bitched me. You've been telephoning."

She ran down the last few steps. "There is no telephone in this house," she said in a flat quiet voice. "Come, let me help you upstairs. Your bed is ready."

Going close up to him and looking into his face, she took his hand. "Give me the stick," she said, as if she were speaking to a child. "You can lean on me," and she put her arm under his.

"There, that's right. That's the way," she said, as swaying against her, he surrendered the stick.

'He can't help himself,' she thought. 'This last effort has finished him,' and aloud she said in the same smooth voice, while she drew his arm across her shoulder, "You have nothing to worry about now. The windows are shut and the doors are fastened. The house is as safe and whole as a shell. No one will come. You are quite safe with me. You can let go now, and sleep."

Their shadows, strangely joined, went before them up the stairs. His weight was almost too much for her, but a fierce joy, a growing elation possessed her. 'I have won,' she thought. 'This is a victory.'

"Here you are," she said, opening the bedroom door. "See, you are quite safe here. The windows are shut and the key is in the door."

She left him half sitting, half lying on the bed, with the candle beside him on the table. As she reached the door he raised himself and looked after her, but she shut the door quietly behind her.

Flattening herself against the landing-wall, she waited, trembling a little and listening intently. Soon she heard heavy shuffling sounds in the room and then the sound of a key turning in the lock. She

smiled and tears of relief ran down her face. "I thought he would do that," she whispered to the landing. "Now I know that what I did was right."

When she had made a last round of the house to see that all the windows and doors were still fastened, and to rake out the fire and to turn the lamps out one by one, she called the dog in and went slowly to her room. After hesitating a moment, she locked her door before undressing and got into bed.

Although she was so tired she lay for a long time looking into the darkness and listening to the wind. 'What have I done?' she asked herself. 'What have I begun? There is no getting out of this now. I will have to see it through, whatever happens.' Her heart began to beat wildly, but she quietened it by pressing her breast with her hands. 'I wonder,' she thought, 'if this panic, this fear of being shut in, caught, is a little like the fear a woman feels when she knows she is with child. Does she feel that here is a trap she had made for herself, a long dark tunnel? Or does she only feel that at last a great emptiness is filled? How should I know?' she thought. 'I shall never know,' and she closed her eyes and turned her face into the pillow.

But now her tears were as light and as impersonal as rain. The wind seemed to her to have a kinder sound; it cradled the house, rocked it, as if it were the sea, and the house, indeed, the shell. On the edge of sleep she thought, 'It is no longer empty. It is heavy and dark with life. It is full.' Now the shell drifted and turned in the waves, growing heavier, darker, quieter, as it sank into the sea.

Edwina dreamt a clear and vivid dream.

She was driving in a charabanc across dry foreign fields. All she could see of the child beside her were the tips of his black shoes, the ends of his black bow, and the top of his sailor hat. Up and down the rolling hills went the yellow charabanc. The passengers were all

dressed in black and every one of them carried a wreath. "You see," she said to the child, "we are looking for a grave." The smell of the syringa flowers on her lap was very strong—she could hardly breathe. But now, through the windows, she saw that the brown fields bore a crop of white headstones. In hundreds and thousands the crosses stood in rows covering all the land. A terrible feeling of desolation came over her. "Stop!" she cried to the driver. "We have arrived." The child beside her clapped his hands in the yellow gloves and cried after her, "Stop! Stop!" in a high shrill voice, but nobody took any notice. The car rushed on and now she knew that the sound of weeping was coming, not from the silent passengers, but from outside, from the graves.

"It's only a dream," she said aloud, as she sat up in bed and fumbled for the matches. Tears were raining down her cheeks and on to her hands and the sound she had heard was still in the room. But when the candle was lit and she saw the sleeping dog and the clothes she had taken off lying on the chair, she was not sure what she had heard. There was nothing to be heard now except the wind.

She got out of bed and, pulling on her dressing-gown, went to the door. The dog lifted his head at the foot of her bed as she turned the key, but he did not follow her when she left the door open and walked on bare feet across the landing. As she reached the other door she heard the sound of weeping again.

A cold draught came up the staircase and she shivered as she listened with her ear against the door. The sound was harsh and confused. She could not make out any words, only a low muttering and sobbing. Suddenly the sound rose to a shout that seemed very loud in the house before it died away. It was a shout of despair, a cry for help. Although she knew that he was calling in his sleep, she threw herself against the door and twisted and turned the door handle; but the door, of course, was locked.

Presently, as the sound was not repeated, she crept back to bed.

II

When Edwina opened her eyes the room was full of pale sunlight; she might have woken to another world. As she lay on her back looking up at the ceiling, across which broad bands of light were moving, she could hear the sea rising and falling on the cliffs below the house, but the wind had gone.

She turned over and, raising herself on her elbow, looked round the room: her clothes were folded neatly on the chair, her hair-pins were scattered on the dressing-table, the curtains swung lazily, like the empty sails of a sailing ship, her clock in its blue leather case showed her that it was half-past seven, which was the right time for her to wake. She remembered her dream, and everything that had gone before. The room was unconcerned; it looked normal, placid, quite itself, in the clear morning light; but when she sat up and reached for her dressing-gown, she saw that the dog had gone from her bed and that the door was not quite shut.

'I must have left it open last night when I forgot to turn the key again,' she thought, but she knew that she had not, and, as she stared at the white panels, she knew, as certainly as if she had seen it happen, that very early in the morning when the first light was beginning to seep into the house, the door had been quietly opened and that her sleeping face, the way she had lain in the bed, the shape of her clothes in the chair, the arrangement of every piece of furniture in the room, had been carefully seen and noted, and that, in answer to a soundless whistle, the dog had risen from the bed and slipped out of the room.

She sat up in bed considering this while her fingers smoothed and plaited her untidy hair. The calm, everyday aspect of the room seemed to say, "Well, what of it? There is nothing alarming in that.

We refuse to be excited." Then another thought struck her. She got out of bed and hurried across the room to the dressing-table.

Her reflection was the early morning one she saw every day. The nose, perhaps, shone more than usual, the lace at the neck of her nightgown was torn. She turned impatiently away from the glass and drew the curtains back from the window.

The sea was pale blue flecked with white. A few low clouds were vanishing over the horizon, leaving the sky bright and empty. In the fields below the house she could see several rabbits, sitting motionless in front of their burrows in the sun. Field, rabbits, sky and cliff, shone palely as if they had been newly washed and left to dry in the morning air. When she opened the window and leaned out a salt freshness swept through her. She shivered in her thin nightgown. 'The room must have been almost dark,' she thought. 'He could not have seen me clearly, and what does it matter, anyway?' And as she breathed the clean sharp air, she thought, 'This morning I shall wear my silk blouse. I must hurry and let this fresh air into the rest of the house. Did I ever unpack that toilet paper? Now, will there be enough milk for coffee for two?'

Before she began to dress, she closed the door and locked it. 'The stable door,' she thought, 'after the horse has gone. How like me.'

'Gone?' she thought, putting her hand up to her heart. 'Oh no—surely not?'

She seized her clothes from the chair and put them on as quickly as she could. Still doing up her blouse, she hurried out on to the landing. The door of Madge's room was open and she saw at once that it was empty.

The bed had been slept in and the bedclothes were tumbled on the floor. The candle was burnt down to its socket and there was a lot of cigarette ash on the carpet. The suitcase, she saw, was still under the bed and the things she had arranged were about the room. She bent down and picked up a pyjama coat from the floor.

'Of course he has not gone,' she told herself. 'He couldn't walk far on that foot.'

The bathroom door was open. The basin was full of soapy water, a used towel hung over the bath, the lavatory seat was lifted and the air was blue with cigarette smoke. 'If he leaves as plain a trail as this behind him I shall soon catch up with him,' she thought, as she opened the window. 'He wouldn't have left the suitcase. He must be somewhere in the house—probably in the kitchen.'

But when she stood at the top of the stairs the house seemed as quiet and undisturbed as a well. After listening a moment she called, "James, James." Nothing answered her.

The front door was still locked and bolted. The hall showed no trace, no footmark, and the sitting-room, when she opened the door, gave her no greeting. The dead fire, the drawn curtains, the crumpled cushions, had a stale sullen air. Even when she pulled the curtains back and opened the door the room did not respond. She thought, 'It is like a room that has been empty for a long time, or one that is waiting in dusty patience for the sound of a key in the front door, for the family to come back from the station.'

'He must be in the kitchen,' she thought, but as she hurried into the hall she saw the hat lying on the floor beside the chest. She picked it up and straightened the brim and touched the stained feather. On the leather band inside the crown were the two initials, B.W., again. As she turned the hat over in her hands she remembered the coat. 'If he was in a hurry he might have gone without the hat,' she thought, 'but surely, on such a fresh morning——' The coat was still hanging in the cupboard where she had left it. 'That settles it,' she thought, 'he is still in the house.'

At first she could not believe that the kitchen, too, was empty. He might so easily have been there at that time in the morning, making himself a cup of tea or giving his shoes a shine. She looked into the scullery and even into the larder, and when she came back

to stand uncertainly by the table, the sight of the dog's empty basket gave her a piercing sense of desolation. She could not stop herself from opening the back door and looking out over the fields, but there was no one in the fields or on the path going between stone walls to the farm.

'All the same,' she told herself, as she shut the door, 'I know they have not gone far. They are somewhere close. Perhaps they are hiding and waiting to see what I will do.'

'That is it,' she thought, looking round the kitchen. 'And I must go about my work as if my whole attention was on the house, as it certainly should be at this time of the morning.' As she put her apron on she thought, 'This is my first settled morning in the house and I shall do exactly as I had planned. I shall put the house in order from top to toe before I have my breakfast.'

She filled the kettle and put it on to boil and then fetched her pan and brush and duster from the cupboard under the stairs. 'Perhaps this aloofness, this new coldness in the house is my fault,' she thought. 'I have been thinking of something else and have been almost neglectful.' She stood in the middle of the hall and tried to collect the house's attention. She wanted to feel it safely round her as it had been yesterday. The house would not respond. It seemed to be full of vague moving airs; it was not whole and complete about her; something was missing. "Now listen here," she said impatiently, and at once she knew that she and the house were listening for a voice, a whistle, a footstep.

"But this is absurd," she said loudly. "We have years to spend alone together. Surely we are not going to allow ourselves to be put out of our stride by a stranger? No more of this nonsense."

She opened the sitting-room door and put her pan and brush before the fireplace and spread a newspaper over the hearthrug. 'The toilet of a house,' she thought, as she put on her housemaid's glove, 'a daily ritual, something as correct as birth and death,

something that has been done in one way or another since the first woman shook up the bed of leaves and smoothed the floor of the cave.' This thought made her happy. She felt for the first time in her life that she was one of a great sisterhood, part of a vast but private pattern.

When she had laid the new fire in the grate and swept the carpet and shaken the rugs, she thought of all that was waiting to be done in the kitchen but, as she crossed the hall she was aware again of the disturbed and restless atmosphere in the house.

'What is it?' she thought, standing still with the ashpan in her hand. 'What is the matter? Why do I feel this disturbance most strongly in the hall? I am uneasy here, almost as if I were under observation.'

She looked round the bare hall, at the cupboard and the door into the garage. 'The garage?' she thought. 'But it is locked. It has not been opened since Madge left.' To make sure she laid her hand on its panels. 'Of course it is locked,' she said. 'And the key is on the shelf under the stairs where Madge put it. Of what use is an empty garage?' She took a step towards the stairs. 'Don't be ridiculous,' she told herself. 'I have wasted enough time already,' and turning impatiently away, she shut the kitchen door firmly behind her.

The kitchen was exactly as she had left it. She emptied the ash into the bin and scraped out the furnace in the scullery. Then she went to the Aga and stood close beside it, stroking its shining primrose surface. 'Even here, in the kitchen,' she thought, 'I can't settle to my work as I should. I am still listening and waiting.' She found the Aga reassuring; it was completely itself, and impervious to vague airs; it had not made itself an integral part of the house; it was untouched, a little outsize, something special, expensive, strange. She picked up the scuttle and fed it with a little of its own fuel and then knelt down before it with a polishing cloth. Every morning, as long as she lived in the house, she meant to go over it

carefully, reverently polishing away the least grain of dust, the faintest smear. This was not necessary, but she felt that it was the least she could do.

'Kneeling here I must look like a worshipper before a household god,' she thought, a squat and shining yellow god, the god of Warmth, or perhaps of Plenty. 'Yes,' she thought, 'even the Aga after all has its traditional place in the home. It is the Household God, the magic jawbone, the family chapel, the necessary touch of wonder, of mystery.'

Now that the Aga had been put into its proper place in the scheme of the house it could no longer reassure her by its indifference. She turned back to the kitchen. For some time she pretended that the kitchen was sufficient, that the squares of the red tiles she was sweeping, the large shapes of the table and dresser, the small shapes, such as the blue mug, the canisters on the shelf, the painted handle of the bread knife, were as important, as clearly seen, as real as usual; but she knew that they were becoming vague and misty and unreal, as if they were the furnishings of a kitchen that had no life, that existed only in the imagination. At last she put the broom and duster away and went to the window. Looking out across the fields she asked herself anxiously, 'Where can they be? The cliffs are so near.'

She did not hear the door open, but she knew without turning her head that he had come from the hall into the kitchen. His stick sounded on the floor and she could hear his heavy breathing as he pulled himself across the room by the table and the chairs. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck stiffening with fear and she kept very still in the same way that a rabbit freezes to the ground at the approach of danger. Now he was standing close behind her, looking over her shoulder at the fields.

On the crest of the hill a small dark shape appeared. It grew bigger on the path as it came towards the house. She strained to see

it more clearly as if it were important to her. At the same moment that his hand closed over her arm she saw it was little John Penny bringing the milk from the farm.

"It's only Johnny," she said as quickly as she could. "He comes every morning with the milk."

"Will he come into the house?" he asked, and his fingers tightened on her arm.

"If I don't answer when he knocks I expect that he will put the can down on the steps and go away," she said, turning her head cautiously to look at him.

"Then mind you don't answer," he said.

He pulled her back into the room between the dresser and the door. She thought, for a moment, that he was going to put his hand over her mouth, but the fingers on her arm only moved a little, gently now, almost caressingly. As she heard the sound of boots coming down the path he put one finger of his free hand warningly to his lips. These two movements, made smoothly and silently, terrified her more than any violent gesture could have done. His face was so close to her that she could see every mark on the smooth cheeks and the newly shaved hair-ends darkening his chin. The whites of his eyes were a little bloodshot, but the lashes, curling upwards, looked startlingly young and thick. The hot brown eyes stared over the raised finger into her face. She found that she could not look away from him.

The knock sounded loudly in the house. Now her fear was all for John Penny. 'Suppose he pushes the door open?' she thought. 'He is only a child, he will be curious.' She wondered if she should scream or pull her arm away from his hand and try to get to the door before he did, but the look in his eyes stopped her. She knew that the only thing to do was to make her body obedient and still. At last she heard the sound of the can on the steps and, after a few seconds, the shuffling of small boots on the path, going away.

He took his hand away from her arm and smiled down at her. It was a slow smile, a little regretful. Violence still trembled on the air of the room; she felt it in much the same way that an electric shock is felt. Her skin tingled, her hand trembled; she knew that she was showing all the symptoms of terror, but now in the room, flowing between them, was that recognizable scent, that emanation. 'If I was afraid,' she thought, 'he was afraid too.'

She stepped back and looked at him curiously. Sweat was running down his face and into his shirt collar. His hand, as he put it to his forehead, was shaking.

"But that was only John Penny," she said. "He is only six years old and not very bright, poor little fellow. Why did you have to worry about him?"

He turned away from her and dragged himself to the table and sat down in her chair, leaning his head on his hands. She felt weak and exhausted as she would have done after a long nervous strain, but she forced herself to follow up her advantage and, standing over him said, "What is the matter? What is it all about? Won't you tell me?"

He sat up and she saw that her chance was gone. The blind was down, the mask was over his face again. Sitting in her chair he looked, in his shirt-sleeves and yellow sweater, unconcerned, quite at ease and insolently sure of himself.

"Listen," he said. "No questions. I know what I'm doing."

He looked at her and then slowly round the kitchen. It was a calculating look. Under it she felt of no more importance than the table or the sink. She flushed and put her hand up to her untidy hair. She knew that she should get him out of the house at once or make the situation clear. He was taking advantage of her kindness and the fact that he was hurt. 'No one,' she thought, 'least of all a good-for-nothing boy, should look at her that way.' But as she told herself this she knew that here in the chair was something more

complicated than the good-looking scamp, the boy—something cold and dark, something she glimpsed but did not understand. She stood near him with her arms hanging by her sides and her head bent, as if she were waiting for orders.

After a moment he said, "Are we aiming to eat to-day? What about breakfast?"

At that she was suddenly too angry to be afraid. 'This is too much,' she thought. 'After all that has happened, he sits calmly there as if he owned the house, expecting a meal to appear before him. I may be stupid and heavy, but I can't change like this from moment to moment.' She wanted to say, "In every civilized house there are times and rules, not to be broken by a casual stranger. This is my house. I, too, have my plans to follow. The sitting-room must be dusted and the beds made before I can think of breakfast. The house comes first. You can wait." She did not say these dignified and reasonable words. Again she felt that unexplained menace, that sense of something outsize, unnatural in the room. She heard herself saying in a high-pitched foolish voice, "What have you done with my dog?"

He looked surprised. "There was a dog around," he said. "A black dog. He followed me. Maybe he's still back there in the garage."

"So that's where you were hiding," she said. "The garage—you were both there all the time."

"Hiding?" he said. "Who was hiding? I was having a quiet look round, getting the lie of the land." He turned his head to look up at her again. "Listen," he said. "I've been up since light. I need something to eat."

Before she could answer the door into the hall was pushed open and the dog sidled into the room. After a quick look round he hurried to give her an elaborate welcome, jumping up to touch her hand and to lay his paws on her thighs. 'Where have you been?' she said silently to him. 'All this kissing of hands and wriggling won't

make up for your behaviour.' But she was glad to feel his warm head under her hand. The room at once felt more normal. "Go to your basket," she said aloud in a cold voice, and he hurried to obey her, laying himself down on the cushion, but watching her over the rim of the basket with bright, interested eyes.

She could not help smiling as she looked at the dog. She began to feel that nothing had happened in the kitchen that could not easily be explained. 'I have been letting my imagination run wild again,' she told herself. And, as she looked from the dog to the man she thought, 'They must be hungry. Whatever happens it is my business to see that they get what food they need. That is my part in the house.' As she turned away towards the larder she thought, 'After all, rules and regulations are only made to be broken in a house that is also a home. If I leave the dusting and the beds until later, really the house will be none the worse.'

When she was hurrying about the kitchen she felt less bewildered. Now she was doing something she could understand. She was busy getting together the best breakfast she could for those who needed it.

'If only I had some fresh eggs,' she thought. 'A whole bowlful of beautiful oval eggs and, as well, slice upon slice of striped bacon, a big pat of butter, a jug of cream, jam, honey, what a breakfast I could make for him.' She sighed. "As it is," she said aloud, "we must manage with what we have. Food altogether is going to be a problem." As she looked into the larder she thought, 'He comes from America and that makes it so much worse—they are not used to doing without as we are.'

She glanced at him once or twice while she worked. He sat by the table with his hands on his knees and his head turned towards the window. Now his face was sullen and heavy. His body slouched in the chair with a cigarette in the hand, and now and then he lifted his head to watch her as she moved about the kitchen, but she knew that his mind was far away. 'It is obvious that he has something on

his mind,' she thought. 'But I won't bother him with questions. I will let things take their course. I feel that he will tell me about it when the right time comes.' His chair was in her way, but after a time she did not notice him particularly. He had become almost an accepted part of the kitchen, like the table or the dresser. He was now only someone with a need to be filled, someone for whom she was busy making breakfast.

The kitchen now seemed to her to be all that a kitchen should be. The pale spring sunlight streamed through the open window. Waves of light ran over the polished side of the Aga and sparkled on the taps in the scullery; the red tiles shone rosily. There was a comfortable smell of coffee and frying fat. 'We are not doing so badly,' she thought, looking round the room. 'Anyone would be glad to eat here this morning.'

Standing in the sunlight she felt a little lightheaded with relief. To steady herself she said sharply, as Madge had often said to her, "Really, Edwina, how gullible you are—a great gull." 'A gull?' she thought. 'That does not sound quite right—a goose. That was what Madge so often called her——' "Edwina, you great goose."

'As a matter of fact,' she told herself, as she turned the toast, 'I am not more foolish than anyone else, at least, not below the surface. Why, I have all sorts of ideas. I only need a little encouragement.' She tossed her head, sending the light fine hair flying back from her forehead. 'Anyway, I don't care,' she thought. 'This is a new day, anything can happen.' And she recklessly spread a fresh cloth on the table: a pale blue cloth to match the day.

After a few moments she drew the other chair up to the table and said in a pleased voice, "Breakfast is ready."

The width of the kitchen table was between them with its spread of cloth, cups and plates, and the remains of a meal nearly over, but as she poured out a second cup of coffee for him, it seemed to her that they were closer to each other than they had been before,

closer than they had been last night in the hall when his arm lay on her shoulder, or when she had held his bare foot in her lap, or when they stood, as they had done a short time before, with his hand on her arm, looking into each other's face. This closeness embarrassed her. 'This is a stranger,' she thought. 'Someone from another country, another continent, who will soon be gone. Then why do I feel this familiarity, and not only that I have seen him before, but that I know him well? Why do I feel that he is a part of the house, almost a part of myself—something like my hand or my heart?' She moved uncomfortably and spilled some coffee on the clean cloth.

'Why should this be?' she asked herself. 'It is most unlikely and most unseemly. Perhaps there is something in the act of sitting down and eating together which brings about a kind of union. Perhaps there is a deep meaning in the old phrases, "Breaking bread with you," and "I have eaten of your salt." Are those who have once eaten together never entirely apart again?' Looking across the table she thought, 'Then how rash I am being. How rash we all are! How dangerous to ask into our homes this person, that person, anyone who will come. Invitations to dine, to lunch, to tea, should only be given to the known and trusted. We can't be too careful whom we eat with.'

'But here,' she thought, looking at him again, 'it is different. Already between us there was something else.'

The light from the window fell directly on to his face. He was not as young as she had thought. 'He must be at least twenty-five,' she told herself, 'he still looks so tired that it is impossible to say. I find it difficult to look at him. Being near him is like being near a too big fire—it makes me breathless, and I feel that I must move further away and yet I like it.' She looked away from him and back again. 'He is too fat,' she thought. 'No, fleshy is the word, too well fed, although he is obviously hard and fit and muscled like a bull that has been fed on the richest grass, the sweetest hay. What a

feeling of well-being his body gives out; how graceful it is in its big loose way. What a naïve conceit it shows in every line and gesture; what superb health. But the face above the body is another matter. It comes from another, older world, and is full of contradictions. The high cheekbones do not go with the big-lipped mouth, the straight nose with the round indulgent chin, or the bold eyes with the fine line of the eyebrows. The upper part of the face is cruel and the lower brutal in a lazy way, and yet it is a handsome, taking face. The head is narrow and as hard as the face, but the long eyelashes give the whole softness and charm. The hair, cut close to the head, curls like the pelt of a young black lamb.' She could not help smiling at him. 'My heart always turns over when I see a black lamb,' she thought. 'Perhaps, after all, he is very young.'

"Why are you smiling?" he said. "Is there something so funny about me?"

"I was only thinking that I had seen you somewhere before." she said.

He leant back and took the silver cigarette case out of his pocket, looked at it, and quickly slipped it back again and brought out the packet of cigarettes and a box of matches and laid them on the table. "Now, now," he said, "that's an old one to pull. You try again, lady." Then, as she stared at him, he said in a different voice, "Forget it. No, you haven't seen me before. You don't know my name, and I don't know yours. Let's get acquainted. My name's Ross Dennehay, Ross Gabriel Dennehay, if you want the whole mouthful."

He looked at her closely as if he were waiting to see if the name meant anything to her, but she only repeated it over in her mind, thinking, 'So that is his name. An Irish name. But the initials are all wrong.' She looked up and saw that he was waiting for her to speak.

"Mine is Edwina Marsh," she said.

His hand played with the unlit cigarette, tapping it on the table-

cloth, while his look went over her, slowly and consideringly, much as it had done in the sitting-room last night. She flushed and moved uneasily in her chair and she could not stop herself from putting up her hand to feel if her knot of hair were still in place. As her hand moved, she saw that it had helped him to make up his mind. He smiled: a brilliant smile, showing the teeth in a flash of white.

She leant forward eagerly. "Why, of course!" she said. "I remember now where I have seen you before. It was in Italy, in Rome."

He said nothing and the wooden look came over his face again. Keeping his eyes on her face he held out the packet of cigarettes to her.

She shook her head absently. "It was in a church," she said. "There was a doorway, rather dark, with a leather curtain hanging over it. You were going through the doorway, holding the curtain back with one hand, and you turned your head and smiled."

She stared at him with her mouth a little open. The smile, as she remembered it, had not been the kind of smile you would expect to see in a church. She remembered the exact turn of the head, the mocking appraising look in the eyes, the invitation in the raised eyebrows, and the hand sketching an unmistakable gesture. She remembered her tingling blush and the way she had run, tripping, stumbling in her haste to catch up with the others. She blushed now, a hot painful, middle-aged blush.

"What a fool I am!" she said. "Of course it is not possible. Why, that was the first time I went to Italy. That was more than twenty years ago. I was eighteen then. You must have been a child."

"I've never been to Italy and I don't want to," he said. "Let me get my foot back where it belongs, on its home ground, and I'll see it never goes stamping around again. Europe—you can keep it. I like to be where I can stretch and breathe and get around."

For a moment she thought that he was going to turn his head

and spit on her kitchen floor, but he only leant back, struck a match, and lit his cigarette. "Back there, in the States," he said, "anything can happen; there's room for anything, you would be surprised."

"That is dangerous, isn't it?" she said, and then, as he stared at her, she said quickly, "I know Italy and the Italians well. We went there every spring for years. You might well be an Italian, except for the way you walk and talk and move your hands. Perhaps that is why you seemed in some way familiar to me."

He scowled angrily. "What are you getting at?" he said. "And what do you mean when you say 'we'? 'We went to Italy,' you said, then why make out you are alone?"

"You can see that I am alone," she said. "I only meant that I went there in the old days first with my father and then with my friend."

"Friend?" he said quickly. "What friend?"

"Why, my friend Madge Selby," she said. "We lived together before the war. Every year we went to Italy for a holiday. She is working in the North a long way from here. Why should you worry about her?"

"A girl friend," he said. "I might have known it. I bet you're as thick as thieves. Suppose she comes worrying round to see what you're up to? Suppose she gets uneasy about you being here alone? Or she might ask someone to look you up. Maybe she's the worrying or the curious kind?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Madge would write first, so that I could get things ready for her. She likes everything to be comfortable and well arranged. And she isn't curious; she is always too busy about her own affairs. She knows what the house is like and that I would tell her if I found it too lonely."

"Just how lonely is it?" he said, looking away from her.

She heard a new note in his voice and for a second she hesitated. Then she said, "The house is all by itself on the cliff, but I haven't

found out yet how lonely it is going to be. I only moved in yesterday. The night before I was still in lodgings in the village."

He lifted his hand with the sharp impatient movement she had seen him make before. "What I'm trying to get at," he said, "is how many people are likely to be along here to-day. There was that boy with the milk. How many others will there be? For all I know you may have asked all the neighbours in for a house-warming. I've got to know. I'm not partial to company right now."

"There's no one to come," she said. "Perhaps a few people might walk past on the cliff path. Perhaps the coastguards or people from the cove, but no one else. I'm new to the place, and I don't know anyone. In the village they think I'm a bit peculiar to live here at all. No one will come to the house unless I ask them."

"And what about the house?" he said. "How do you pay the rent and how do you get your food?"

"I buy everything from the village as I need it," she said. "The house is mine. My father, who died a long time ago, left me some money quite recently, enough to buy the house and to live here quietly. That sounds strange, I know. It is a long story and you wouldn't be interested." She paused and looked at him and saw at once that he was not interested.

"What about this friend of yours, this Madge?" he asked. "Does all this suit her? Won't she try to get in on this too?"

She looked down at the tablecloth. "Madge expects to share the house with me when her work is finished," she said slowly. "We always planned to buy a house here in Cornwall, but that was before I had my money." She looked up at him and as she met his eyes she whispered, "Perhaps she will never come. She won't come if I can prevent it."

The words she had just said out loud into the room astonished her. She had not known that they were in her mind. 'Madge,' she thought contritely, 'I don't mean them. What possessed me?'

Now he was looking thoughtfully round the room and out of the window at the slope of fields. She saw an awed, wondering look come into his face; it made him look almost childish, much younger than he had seemed to her before. The eyes he turned to her were shining.

"Do you believe in luck?" he said. "You should. It's there, as large as life, as real as my hand for some of us, for the lucky ones. I could tell you a thing or two about luck, but never mind that now. Here I am and all this," he waved his arm in a large gesture that took in fields, house, kitchen, herself. "Might have been made for me just when I needed it." He put his hands on the arms of his chair and half raised himself from the seat. "You're another lucky break for me, the best I've had so far," he cried. "Now I know that I'll beat them all. I'll get out of it yet—see if I don't! Now I'm all set. There will be no stopping Ross Dennehay."

"There is still your ankle," she said in a cold voice. "Haven't you forgotten that?"

She did not know why she said it, but if it was to recall him to the kitchen she saw that she had succeeded. He sank back in the chair and the excitement went from his face. The sullen heavy look came down over it, like a blind.

After a moment's silence he said, "Well, what about it? I haven't made out badly on it this morning. It will be as good as ever in a day or two."

"Better let me look at it again," she said. "The compresses should have been changed before this. It's not my fault if you hide it from me. Now put it up on this chair."

As she got up from the table she thought, 'It is strange how we change places when it comes to any question of his ankle. Then it is I who gives the orders. He is afraid of it.'

And when his foot was under her hands, while it was her business, almost her property, she thought, 'I know that I could easily make

him think that it is worse than it is. But there is no need for that. It is bad enough and he has made it worse, dragging himself about the house in this foolish way. He will be here for days.'

"You ought to see a doctor," she said.

He did not trouble to answer, only shook his head in the same abrupt, angry way.

"Then you must rest it," she said. "Keep it up and let me see to it properly."

"Can't you tell me how long it will be?" he said. "Can't you see I've got to use it?"

"I'm not a doctor," she said. "But I should say at least ten days."

She bent to pick up a bowl and before she could straighten herself again his hand struck her shoulder heavily, almost knocking her to the ground.

"Ten days," he said. "Jesus!"

She could not believe that this had happened to her. There she was, on her knees, and the water from the broken bowl was soaking through her skirt on to her legs, but she could not move. She crouched where she was, holding her shoulder and looking up at him with a dazed stare.

He was not looking at her and she saw that he did not know that he had touched her. His arm was still held out with the fingers stiffly clutching at nothing. His face was white. His lips barely moved, and the stream of words flowed from them like water trickling from the stone lips of a fountain. She had never heard such words before, but every second she spent kneeling by the chair she understood their meaning more clearly. Comprehension was slowly mounting in her as if a muddied and fouled tide was flowing directly from him to her. As she listened she thought that she was changing, becoming dark, heavy, laden. "This can't go on," she told herself as if she were calling out in a dream. 'I can only take in a certain amount.'

The words stopped abruptly and his eyes came back to her face. He frowned and, making an awkward movement, a wave of the hand that might have been an apology, a threat, or a gesture of despair, got up from his chair. Hopping and staggering like a huge wounded bird, he crossed the room to the door. The dog leapt from his basket and with flying ears and eager tail hurried after him and slipped through the door as it slammed behind them.

After a moment she got stiffly to her feet and began to clear the table. Her hands were trembling and she could not see the table through her tears. 'Don't be silly,' she told herself. 'I'm not hurt. I have had a bit of a shock, that is all.'

As she carried the tray into the scullery she thought, 'Even in this civilized country there are wives who take that sort of thing as a matter of course. I must remember that he was not really hitting out at me, but at fate, at chance. Perhaps I should have broken it to him more gently. It is obvious that his plans, whatever they are, have been ruined completely. Now that I come to think of it, I can't blame him.'

'I must go on as if nothing had happened,' she thought. 'Anything else would be dangerous. I am sure that he will have gone into the sitting-room or out on to the front steps where he can see the sea and feel less shut in. He will forget that this ever happened. For both our sakes, I must go on as if there were no one in the house except myself.'

She picked up her duster, and as she went upstairs she thought, 'Yes, it is important that anyone passing in the fields and looking at the house should see nothing out of the way. They may see a white-walled house with smoke coming from the chimney, a woman shaking a duster from a window, perhaps a black dog lifting his leg against the fence, but nothing else. A house, too, can be a mask,' she thought. 'It is there to show a smooth face to the world. Every shell holds secrets.'

Now she knew that the house was giving her its full attention again. She made the beds quickly, but smoothing the sheets, tucking in the blankets with an almost passionate care and thoroughness, as if she were determined to show the house that its attention was returned. She dusted every piece of furniture, shook the rugs, cleaned the bathroom, with the same concentration and same absorbed air. When there was nothing more to be done upstairs she shook her duster out of the window as if she were fulfilling a promise. Immediately below her in the back garden she saw the dog lifting his leg against the fence, but there was no one to see these two gestures. There was no one looking at the house or passing by in the fields.

She swept the stairs and dusted the banisters, but she did not want to linger in the hall, and after giving the door into the garage one quick glance, she went into the sitting-room.

The long windows were wide open. As she went to close them she saw that he was sitting on the lowest step in the sunshine. It was, she saw, a good place that he had chosen. The steps went down into the shallow dip behind the stone wall. From where he sat he could see the fields and the path along the cliff, but he was hidden by the wall and the side of the house. 'If anyone comes close to the house he could duck down behind the steps,' she thought. 'There is a way of escape through the house behind him. He is quite safe there for the moment, although that yellow sweater is a bit conspicuous.'

The emptiness of cliff and field reassured her and after a moment she closed the windows and turned back to the room.

'This room is not waiting for anything now,' she thought. 'He is there, sitting on the steps, and now it has everything it needs. It is wide awake and eagerly fulfilling its function of being a sitting-room. And all over the house it is the same: the kitchen has never been so thoroughly a kitchen, or the bedrooms places of

peace and repose. There is an incentive in the house. A new ingredient has been added and it makes all the difference. There now seems a reason——'

She began to dust, very carefully and slowly, the things that were for her an integral part of the house: her china, her books, the peacock-feather fan, her grandfather's snuff-box, the prints from Florence, her garden calendar. Each thing that she touched carried with it an aura of association, of memory, of feeling. It seemed to her that each thing was related in some degree to the others, that everything in the room was strung on a common thread. 'It would make no difference,' she thought, 'if these things were a twig, a straw, a lump of clay. All go to make the nest, the one idea of home. It is this that matters; it is this that is important.'

The room was dusted except for the mantelpiece. She had left that for the last because her photographs were there. They showed her, whenever she looked at them, that this was indeed her own place and could belong to no one else. Yesterday morning she had taken them out of their box and had arranged them along the mantelpiece: the one of her father, the studio portrait of Madge, the mounted snapshot, rather faded, of the house she had lived in as a child, one of herself in a white dress on a terrace in Florence. She knew very well that they spoilt the look of the mantelpiece with its old clock and carefully hung miniatures, but she liked to see them there and they could always go back into the box before Madge came.

She picked up the first photograph and dusted it. Not long ago, in the room in No. 11, it could not be long ago because she remembered every word, Madge had said, "Ena, I can't have your old photographs cluttering up the place any longer. Why not keep them in your album where you could pour over them to your heart's content without inflicting them on other people. My poor sentimental Ena, you were born twenty years too late. What a

perfect Edwardian you would have been. I can just see you in a high-necked white lace blouse, pouring out tea in a rosy drawing-room full of looped curtains, well stuffed sofas, and little tables crowded with photographs in silver frames. My dear, that fine womanly form of yours is wasted on this modern world. And that reminds me, I really don't think you *can* wear that jumper. Darling old Ena, what *is* there to cry about?"

'Madge,' she thought, looking down at the photograph in her hand and remembering every word, although she now knew that they had been spoken many years ago. 'Madge, my dear friend Madge—a little forked snake's tongue, darting out between the roses to wound, to sting.'

She heard the glass window being pushed open and the sound of his stick on the carpet, but she did not look round. Her whole attention was fixed on the photograph. It seemed to her that the unadmitted conflict of years, the unspoken resentments and grievances, had chosen that particular moment to come to a head. 'Madge,' she said silently to the photograph, to the well-known face above the unfamiliar uniform collar, 'Madge, you are at your old games again. You are trying to spoil everything for me, to take away from me the little you do not share.' She thought that the pictured eyes were smiling into hers with the cold amusement she knew so well. The old helpless rage seized her. In a moment, she knew, she would be in tears; but now he was coming towards her across the room as if she had given a cry for help and he was rushing to the rescue. Now he was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. Without a word she held out the photograph to him.

"Who is it?" he said. "No, don't tell me. I know, it's that friend of yours, that Madge."

He took the photograph from her and looked at it carefully.

"Some sour puss," he said. "I couldn't do with that one, not if you

were to hand her to me on a plate and say, 'She's all yours and nothing to pay.' No, she's not my line at all, your lady friend. She gives me the creeps."

He put the photograph back on the mantelpiece and rubbed his hand on his trousers as if it had touched something unpleasant. The sullen look was on his face again and she was astonished to hear a note of fear and anger in his voice. "Does she really make you feel like that?" she said, and took a step nearer to him.

She knew that she was smiling and that in a moment she would laugh aloud, but the old loyalty made her say, "She is not like that you know. She is good looking and clever and witty. She is my friend."

"That's enough of her," he said. "You keep away from that one. What good will she do you? She's not your sort. What does a fine well-set-up woman like you want with her?"

Before she could think of anything to say he turned the portrait to the wall and she heard herself laughing foolishly. When he looked at the snapshot of herself she blushed like a young girl.

"That was taken ages ago," she said quickly. "In Italy when I was young."

He turned slowly back to the room. "Not so long ago," he said. "I would have known it anywhere."

She looked at him doubtfully. He said, "Honest. I mean it. Now see here, I came to find you. I've been thinking things over. It's time we had a talk. Come on out there in the sun. There's something I've got to tell you."

When she hesitated he said, "You're not sore with me, are you?" and she heard herself saying, "No, no, of course not. I understood. You go on out and I will come in a minute. I haven't quite finished in this room. There is still something I have to do."

She waited until he had disappeared through the glass doors,

leaving them wide open behind him, and then she turned back to the mantelpiece.

"What you have meant to me all these years, Madge, I no longer know," she whispered. "I only know it is finished, that never again can you mean anything to me. Your reign is over."

She picked up the photograph again and thought, coldly and distinctly: 'Madge, for the last time let me take a good look at you. I see you in the room at No. 11. You are reading the paper while you wait for me to bring you your breakfast. You are wearing your black coat and skirt. Your beautiful thin feet and ankles in the silk stockings I washed for you and the high-heeled shoes are perched like a couple of vain sleek blackbirds on the fender. Your hands holding the paper are thin and ringless and a little yellow. In a moment you will lower the paper and say, "For goodness sake, Ena, hurry up. I will be late again." All this I see and much more, but already you are growing dim. In a minute I shall forget the colour of your eyes, or that your long fastidious body hates to be touched, is allergic to shellfish, dreads cold and the feel of velvet. I am already forgetting that you can't endure to see a picture hang crookedly or a book upside down on a shelf, that you like High Church services, detective books, and peppermint creams. All that I know of you, together with what you know of me, and this, if written out, would fill several large books, is disappearing, is disappearing because it never was enough. Our fifteen years together are dwindling. Soon they will be a handful of dust. Madge, at last I am free of you. Something new is beginning. Now there is someone else.'

As she collected the photographs from the mantelpiece and, making them into a neat pile, put them back into their box on the bottom shelf of the cupboard, she said aloud:

"I shan't have these photographs out again. I don't need them now."

III

In the sheltered curve of the windows even the stone steps were warm to touch. From where they sat on the top step, she could see the field and the path going along the edge of the cliffs and the sea. The sea was a deep unEnglish blue; the white side of the house shone in the sunlight. 'We might be sitting on the steps of a villa in the Mediterranean,' she thought. 'Is this really an early spring day in Cornwall? But then, of course, it is a special day.'

The sun was warm on her hair. High over the field a lark was singing. She was suddenly happy and she knew that she did not want to hear what he had to tell her. It was enough that he was sitting beside her on the steps. She wanted everything to stay as it was, exactly as it was at that moment. She would have liked to take the day and set it apart from all other days, somewhere safe and private where it could hold this particular moment for ever in its gold frame.

She began to speak, in a voice which she tried to keep low and even, about the garden she planned to make in the hollow between the steps and the fence. It seemed to her that it was important to keep him sitting silently there in the sun. "It will always be more or less sheltered here from the wind," she said. "I shall be able to grow plants that don't mind the salt air. First I shall make a rough lawn and then on one side of the path I shall put a hedge of lavender and on the other a bed of pinks. Perhaps I shall even try roses, the small and rambling kind."

Her words sounded thin and foolish and she saw that he was not listening, that he could not be expected to listen to talk of this kind, but she went on desperately, "Isn't it good to see the sun? Let's sit here and enjoy it while we can because it's not going to last—the weather, I mean. Look, there are a few clouds about already. By this evening it will be grey and cold again."

It was no use trying to stop what had to come, what was waiting inevitably in the next moment. He lifted his hand and said, "Listen. There's something I've got to tell you."

He was looking past her head at the blank wall of the house. As she saw his face her heart sank. It was smooth and expressionless, turned deliberately towards her for her inspection. It gave nothing away, nothing whatever, although it seemed to say, "Look at this honest face, as open as the day. It is keeping nothing back from you."

"Of course you have guessed by now," he said. "You must have done, no one could be that dumb. Maybe you're thinking what you can do about it, and I'm telling you now that there's nothing you can do, nothing at all. Here I am and here I'm going to stay until I can walk so that no one will notice anything is wrong. And you're going to keep me here and feed me and not let on to a soul. I'm not saying it won't make it easier and sort of pleasanter if you play along with me, but what you do isn't going to make any difference. Got that?"

She did not answer and the slow careful voice went on: "The whole pack of them is after me, but I've got a chance because now I've found a hide, somewhere to lie low. When things are less hot I'll get away somehow. It can be done. I'll think out a way. There's always a way out of anything if you try hard enough and have time. But you get this clear—no funny business. You're in this now with me. You had your chance last night when I was all in and you didn't take it. What your idea was then I don't know, but now it's too late."

She looked at the fields in a bewildered way, almost as if she expected to see a wave of men and beasts sweeping down on the house, but the fields were as innocent and empty as they had always been.

"The whole pack?" she whispered. "What do you mean? No, I don't understand."

"Jesus!" he said. "The whole bloody country is after me. Listen while I spell it out for you."

He pointed a finger at his chest. "See this?" he said. "See this me, sitting right here beside you? Well, three days ago this was No. 1077542 P.T.A. Corps 26 Mechanized Division U.S.A. Army. Now you're seeing Ross Dennehay, Ross G. Dennehay, the one and only, from here and there and round about. Got it? Yes, I walked out, skipped it, did a bunk, vamoosed—put it the way that comes easy to you."

"A deserter?" she said. "Is that all? Why, I was thinking——"

The face above her was no longer smooth and blank. She shrank back against the wall and tried to turn her head away, but he leant forward and said in a soft cold voice she had not heard him use before:

"Just what do you mean?"

Her eyes filled with tears and she put her hand out and touched his arm. This seemed to her a dangerous thing to do, but she knew almost at once that her hand, although it was trembling, was making a bridge between them, gaining time.

"I don't mean anything," she said. "I talk too much. I talk a lot of nonsense. I get the strangest idea. I only mean that there are worse things than being a deserter."

"No, no—wait," she cried, as he lifted his hand. "I only mean that it doesn't seem such a terrible thing to me. I understand. You see, when I come to think of it, I'm a deserter too. I have run away, turned my back on everything and hidden, because I couldn't go on any longer. Yes, it was that more than my illness. I couldn't bear it any more. It was all too much for me, the war, London, everything, just living."

She looked at him timidly. His face was expressionless, but she went on, speaking more slowly, "One day when I was a child at my first school, the teacher took a flower, it was a narcissus, I

remember, and put it into a glass of red ink. She told us to watch what happened. We saw the pale green stem growing slowly darker, and then, after a time, the veins in the white petals becoming red and ugly. The flower became something quite different, not itself, something thick and wrong, and the flower couldn't help it. I remember that I cried with horror and asked to be taken home and that the other children laughed at me. That probably seems silly and fanciful to you, perhaps it is. I'm only trying to explain what I mean. Why should it be such a wicked thing to know when you are no more use, when you have had enough and have taken in all you can? There will always be some who can't go on for ever, who are less whole, less of a piece. The others should only be sorry and try and understand. Yes, now and always, war or no war, there will always be deserters. But is it such an evil word? To me it only has a bleak and lonely sound."

She paused for breath and saw that he was smiling, if this grim, drawing back of the lips could be called a smile.

"You try that out on the big noises, the generals and admirals, the people who get things done," he said. "You can talk, I give you that. Maybe by the time you've finished with them they won't know if they're coming or going. But to me all that doesn't mean a thing. I know very well why I did what I've done and what's likely to happen to me if I'm caught."

He turned his head towards the sea and said in a low voice, as if he were speaking to himself: "But they won't get me. I won't let them get me. My luck has seen me so far, it must go the whole way. I haven't got as far as this for nothing."

He changed his position on the steps again until he was facing her, and raising his voice said, "I'm twenty-five, getting on for twenty-six years old, and I've never got going properly, never made out as I ought to have done, never touched real money. Guess I'm one of those rolling stones you've heard about, but one

that's always tried hard to get some of the moss to stick and never managed it somehow. I wasn't doing too bad back in '42 when I ran into a bit of trouble. Nothing much, but I had to drop out of things. I was glad of the army then, but I didn't mean them to sling me across to Europe and keep me here for years. Well, three weeks ago, I got a letter. It was from my partner. It said in a roundabout way, 'Ross, I'm letting you in on something. Here's our chance at last. You get out of the army and back here somehow and we are made for life.' I knew that he meant it, and I knew that I couldn't wait. The war was winding up, but I knew it might be months or years before I got back. I couldn't wait for War or Peace. I couldn't wait for some big noise to give the word that they didn't need to hang on to me and a few million other poor suckers any longer. It was now I needed. Now, not any other time. I read that letter until I knew that nothing could stop me. Nothing has, and here I am. I've got this far, and I'll get the rest of the way. There, that's the whole set up. All you need to know. Don't say I didn't act square by you. And don't you start getting ideas."

She looked into his face and knew that it was again a mask, a blind hiding black and secret places, a world which he did not mean her to see. 'If that is the truth,' she thought sadly, 'it is only part of the truth—there is a great deal more that you have not told me.' For a moment she thought of saying to him, "If you want me to help you, you must let me see it all," but as she looked at him she knew that she did not want to know, that it would be wiser to leave things as they were.

'But it is too late,' she thought. 'I already know too much. I don't understand how I know so much about this stranger. But "know" is the wrong word—I feel, or see. I feel that this wall of secrecy he is so carefully trying to build between us is useless, unnecessary. Why should I feel this? How can this stranger be anything to me. I don't understand.'

Now she did not try and understand. She was watching the way the fine black hairs on his wrists stood up like a regiment of soldiers and the way the knuckles whitened and shone when he clasped his hands round his knees. His trousers had a red fleck in them. There was a scratch on the back of one hand. She had not noticed before that his nails were square and cut very short. 'Why is the physical appearance of this stranger so important to me?' she asked herself. 'Why does it matter, matter very much, that this hand, which is nothing to do with me has a scratch below the fingers or that the nails are a healthy pink? Why does it give me pleasure to look at his ankle in the fawn sock, even if it is slim and strong and makes me think of the fetlock of a deer? If I shut my eyes I can still see all these details. I can feel them with my own body.'

As she looked at his bent dark head she told herself fiercely, 'I won't pretend any more. I can't deceive myself any longer.'

She shut her eyes and leant her head against the wall of the house. 'The trouble with me,' she told herself, 'is that I am too old for this. This is a raw, indecent emotion, suitable only to the young. At my age I should be over this sort of thing. I should be able to see the trap and step aside from it with a smile, saying, "Oh, no thank you—that looks very delightful, very tempting, but I leave that sort of thing to the young. Only they can suffer this gracefully. I have no wish to look ridiculous." 'And that is exactly what I am going to look,' she told herself. 'I am going to lose all sense of decency, humour and proportion. I am going to shut my eyes to everything I don't wish to see. Soon I won't see that he will use my foolishness for his own ends, that he will, whatever he says or does, be secretly jeering at me, at my easy mind and my ageing body. I should be ashamed to sit here, holding my cold hands out to this fire. But I am not ashamed. He warms me. He needs me.'

She opened her eyes and looked across the fields to the sea. 'I didn't ask that this should happen to me,' she thought. 'No one

need know what I feel. Even he need never know if I keep my head.'

His voice sounded as if it came from a long way off. He was saying, "You just do what I say and everything will work out fine."

She turned her head to look at him and saw that he was staring at her in a strained and anxious way. She wanted to smile at him and tell him not to worry, but she could not rouse herself. She felt soft and weak, open and malleable to the sun, as if she no longer had a separate existence of her own. When he leant forward and took her hand clumsily and pressed it between his own hands, she thought resentfully, 'You need not make yourself do that. There is no need.' She could feel an urgency, a compelling force, passing from his fingers into her and she wanted to cry angrily, "Can't you see that there is no longer any need to spend this force on me? I am no longer myself. I am only your rest and shelter. Surely you must see?"

He was looking at her as if he had not seen her before. The look was bewildered, the hard confident lines of his face were softened and blurred. Dropping her hand he said, "You don't know what it was like, out there on the cliffs in the dark and the wind. Hearing the sea and not knowing where it was. The rain and the wind pushing and driving. Being afraid to move and afraid to stand still. Running in circles, but never getting away from the sea. And then, suddenly knowing which way to go, like following a path, only there was no path. Or like a ray, a beam, drawing you in until—there were the steps and the door."

He looked at her and cried angrily, "But I tell you I knew which way to go. It was just as if someone had called to me. I tell you I had to go that way."

She saw the look of fear on his face change. Now he looked only exhausted. The eyes were dull and bloodshot and he yawned

suddenly and violently. He said something in a thick blurred voice, but she could not hear what it was. Then he sighed and put his head down in her lap.

As she leaned over him she heard him say, "I'm tired. Dead tired. You don't know."

Edwina sat very still, leaning her back against the frame of the door and looking at the sea. The sea was now a dull blue-grey. The best of the day was over; already clouds were beginning to come up over the sun. A shadow fell on the cliff-edge, turning the grass from gold to green. She watched it creep towards the house, dulling everything it touched. Now it was on the fence, on the patch of earth, on the turf at the foot of the steps, on the house. She shivered, but the sun shone again and the cliff-edge was gold against the sea.

'I have never had anything,' she thought. 'Nothing that other women have. All my life has been nothing.'

She looked down. The hair on the back of his neck went down in two points into his collar; here the hairs were stiff and coarse. The yellow sweater was wrinkled across the shoulders. One arm was doubled under him and the other lay across her knees. His position looked uncomfortable and strained, but she did not move for fear of waking him. He slept soundly, deeply, as if her lap were a feather bed. 'For all he knows or cares,' she thought, 'that is what it might be.'

Tears ran down her cheeks. She let them run. The empty fields were blurred and lost. She could not see the path or the sea, but she knew that the path led over the cliffs away from her, and that the sea lay between her and his strange country, where she would never go. Very soon, whatever she did or did not do, he would be gone and she would be left behind.

'I shall be left,' she thought, 'with nothing.'

Tears would not help her. They hid the line of the path and the emptiness of the fields. She had forgotten that he was in danger and

that it was foolish to sit there exposed on the steps. Somewhere over the crest of the hill behind the house a pursuit was moving closer. Her heart began to beat quickly and her mouth was dry, as if it knew what it was like to run, doubling and turning across the fields. She would have liked to draw him up into her arms and hold him against her breast. Her eyes were now dry and bright as they searched the fields and the cliff for the first sign of movement, of danger.

Something was moving on the other side of the fence. She leant over him as far as she could and held her arms out to hide him. But it was nothing—only a weasel, or a stoat, a small red shape slipping from stake to stake of the fence, on the prowl, hunting. She watched it crouch, stiffen, spring, and a flurry in the grass.

‘It has missed,’ she thought. ‘It has nothing.’

But the weasel did not pause; it rippled smoothly and unconcernedly from stake to stake, out of the picture. Now the wind had changed. Far out at sea the white flecks were leaping and hurrying towards the land. The grasses were bent in one direction. She was cold and her hair blew into her eyes. She would have liked to change her position; her back was beginning to ache, but the warm weight of his head and shoulders pinned her to the steps. She knew that it was getting late, and that the house was waiting for her. She knew that every minute they spent on the steps increased the danger of someone appearing on the cliff path and looking towards the house; but she also knew that she would not move, that she would sit where she was keeping guard over him until he woke—even if he should sleep for hours, even if he should sleep all day.

‘He didn’t tell me the truth,’ she thought, ‘not the real truth, the thing that matters. But I don’t care, he will tell me that too soon enough. I don’t care what he has done or what he is going to do. I don’t care if I am nothing to him.’

She held her hand out over his head. 'I am a fool,' she thought, 'but nothing else matters to me now, nothing.'

When he woke, minutes or hours later, which, she never knew, he stirred and sighed and sat up putting his hand to his head. She seized his arm and said, without giving him time to understand where he was: "Quick! Let's go inside and shut the door and the windows, and draw the curtains. It is safer in the house."

IV

It was cold inside the garage with the still heavy coldness of shut-in places. There was a smell of wood and of lime and the indefinable cold smell of concrete. The empty packing cases were piled in the middle of the floor; the window, set high in the wall, was dark with grime and the marks of last night's rain.

Edwina dropped the armful of cushions and rugs on to the mattress she had spread out on the floor below the window and said, "But you can't stay here all afternoon. You would be quite safe upstairs in your bedroom. If I lock the house up when I go out, who is to know that it isn't empty? Surely this is going to absurd lengths. Why the garage of all places?"

He was rubbing a small space clean on the glass at a corner of the window. For a moment he did not answer, and then he said, "I can see the path from here. I'll be able to see if anyone comes near the house, but even if they come and look through the window, they won't see me. I'll be hidden by the wall and the packing case. The window is as good as a watch tower. That's what it's going to be."

"No one will come," she said. "And if they did and found the

doors locked they would go away. You would be far safer in your own room. But I tell you no one will come. Why should they?"

"You never know," he said. "I'm taking no chances."

"You'll catch your death of cold here," she said crossly. "The place is like a tomb."

The light from the window fell directly on to his head and shoulders, giving his black hair a blue sheen. The yellow sweater had taken on a harsh tone which gave his skin a cold and sallow look. 'But here,' she thought, 'in this bare and ugly garage, he looks more at ease and at home than he did in my sitting-room. The concrete floor and the rough wood of the packing cases seem a suitable background for him, as the red naked trunks of a giant forest would do, or soaring improbable buildings, or immense lonely plains and exaggerated sunsets, or a steel jungle of machinery. The compact and soft and pretty does not show him to the best advantage. I begin to wonder how the house contains him at all.'

As if he felt that she was watching him he turned away from the window and, leaning on his stick, began to pull handfuls of paper and straw shavings from the open packing case beside him.

"What are you doing?" she said.

Without looking up he said, "You're always asking questions. You do what I say—put the stove here and give me the bottle of kerosine and the matches. You'll see soon enough."

She fetched the stove from the hall and put it down where he pointed. She thought worriedly, 'There isn't much kerosine left—that is another thing—of course I must go to the village. Does he think we can subsist on air and warm and light ourselves with our own fingers? It is going to be difficult enough as it is, really, how tiresome men are!' It made her warm and happy to think this last thought. That was the kind of thing other women thought and said. "How difficult Jim is about his food!" "How tiresome Jack is about wearing a tie!" But as she looked at him again she knew that

such domestic everyday thoughts could never apply to him, any more than a bird of prey could be kept in a canary's cage.

"Don't you trust me yet?" she said as she lit the stove. "Why don't you want me to go to the village?"

"I don't trust anyone," he said. "But I have been thinking and I have found a way to fix you so that I needn't worry where you go. Look here, this is how it's going to be."

He pulled the stove into the shadow of the packing case where it was screened from the window and put a pile of paper and shavings beside it. "Take some more of this paper and spread it in a line from the stove to the door," he said. "And put another pile ready in the hall. That's fine. Now I'll keep the bottle of kerosine handy here, and the matches, not that I'll need those, the stove will do the trick when it's needed. The banisters are made of wood, and then there are the thin curtains and that old chest; they would burn quickly. Got it now?"

She stared at him for a moment and then sat down quickly on the mattress. Her legs were trembling. She put her hands over her eyes.

"Jesus!" he said. "Must you cry again? I can't stand it. You needn't look like that. I won't burn your precious house if I can help it. I need a roof over my head. All this is just to make sure of you. I'll be watching from the window and if you don't come back alone I'll set it going. And don't you try to be smart. I'll leave this set up here when you get back, and if a whole division or the fire brigade turns up any time, they'll be too late to save the house."

She knew that it was no use trying to reason with him. He was looking round the garage in a satisfied and calculating way, as if it were a stage all set and ready for a scene he had planned.

"What about the dog?" he said. "You had better take him with you. He might bark alone there in the kitchen and we don't want anyone coming round."

He shuffled a few steps across the floor and looked at the stove; then, pulling the check overcoat round his shoulders, he sat down on the cushions beside her.

"You didn't mean what you said at lunch-time in the kitchen," she said unhappily. "I wanted you to go upstairs to your room, but you said you would rather stay with me, that you felt safer when I was there. You sat with your back to the window because you said I could see the fields and the path, and if anyone came there would be plenty of time. And all those questions you asked me about the house—you only wanted to find out what it meant to me."

"I didn't know then that you wanted to go to the village," he said. "I thought you would stay where I could watch you."

"And you said you trusted me," she went on as if he had not spoken. "You said that you felt easy for the first time for days. You said it was good to have found someone who understood. You said a lot of things."

"I don't trust any woman further than I can see her," he said sullenly. "That's one thing I learnt young. Another is, not to trust anyone. I've always been easier in my mind when I was working alone. Guess I'm made that way, sort of secretive. I would rather not let my right hand know what my left hand does. Although, of course, they're twice as strong together."

He held his hands out and looked at them. They were large, thin hands with long square-ended fingers. He flexed the fingers and turned the wrists until the palms were uppermost. Now the fingers were curved; they turned and came almost together as if they were gripping some invisible thing between them. *

As she stared at his hands she thought, for no real reason, of two great shapes, yellow, low, slipping through the moving blackness of the jungle night with a curl of the lip, a suppressed snarl, each intent on its own hunting.

"Don't do that with your hands," she said sharply. "You make them look like claws."

"What's up?" he said, putting the hands down on his knees. "Are you still sore with me because I like the garage better than your sitting-room? I tell you I like it. I feel safe here. It makes me feel like you do in a fight when you get a good solid wall behind you. And I tell you straight out, tables and chairs and pictures, all those things, don't mean so much to me. They're all very fine at first, and it's good to lie soft for a bit, but after a time I get to feel sort of shut in and that I can't breathe. I like best to doss down on the floor in some blankets, to eat off a box, to have my place empty and easy, so I can clear out in a moment if I want to. I had a room once, in Chicago, at the top of a high building. There was nothing there except a mattress and a box and a coat-hanger on the door-peg. There was a key to the door and the fire escape outside, that was all I wanted. I was down on my luck then, but I would come home late and when I had shut the door and taken off my coat, I would lie down on the mattress and know that there was nothing but the roof and the sky over me; that no one could get at me. I tell you I liked that room. It was as good as a cave or something built up in a tree, the sort of things you think of when you're a kid."

"And that's what you are doing now," she said. "All this playing round with paper and matches—that's the sort of thing a child would think of. You don't need to behave like this. But you are only doing it to try and frighten me. You don't mean it."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," he said slowly. "Why did I have to open my mouth wide and spill it all out to you? I have never told anyone about that room."

Keeping his eyes on her face he put his hand into his hip pocket and pulled out the silver cigarette case. Before he could get it back and bring out the packet of cigarettes, as she knew he would do, she cried, "What's wrong with that case? Why don't you use it?"

If you prefer cigarettes out of a packet why carry the case at all?"

He looked down at the case in his hand and then slowly up at her. "Don't try and be clever," he said in a surprisingly gentle voice. "Don't be sharp, or maybe you'll get yourself hurt. You shouldn't try to be clever. You shouldn't try to think, it doesn't suit you. You are not that sort. You leave that to your sharp-nosed friend, that Madge. You're the soft, warm, easy kind—you stay that way. That's the way I like them."

He slipped the case back into his pocket and put his other hand on her shoulder. She could feel it there, warm and heavy, through her blouse and cardigan. She sat still with her head bent, remembering her father's voice saying from a long way off, from behind the wall of years between them, "Think, my girl, think! To think is the whole duty of man, the only thing that sets him apart from the other beasts." She lifted her head and looked into the face near her own, but the hand on her shoulder moved down her arm in a long caressing gesture, and lay for a moment over the hands folded in her lap. Now she could not have spoken even if she remembered what it was she had meant to say.

"Off you go then to your shopping," he said. "Remember, I'll be watching out for you. Get right back as soon as you can."

As she scrambled awkwardly to her feet, she felt his hand again. It touched her lightly on the buttocks and rested for a moment on the calf of her leg. She knew that now it meant nothing, his hand was only making an automatic gesture, but she could not stop herself from blushing like a young and foolish girl. The hot painful flood covered her neck and face and arms.

When she reached the door, she looked back. He was lying on the cushions with one arm behind his head and the other holding a cigarette. Already he had forgotten her. In the grey light of the garage his face looked remote and cold.

She closed the door quietly, remembering to leave the key on the garage side. The hall seemed small and warm and familiar and a little close; it was in another world to the world of the garage. "I must remember that I am nearly twice his age," she whispered. "Of course he didn't mean anything. How could he?"

Without another look at the garage door she turned away and went upstairs to put on her coat and to change her shoes.

The dog was waiting for her in the bedroom. He sat and watched her while she began to tie a scarf round her throat. "Don't stare at me like that," she said to him. "You know very well that this time you are going with me and you have seen this scarf before. What is the matter? Do I look different?"

But the Edwina in the glass looked much the same. Perhaps there was more colour in the face. Perhaps the eyes were brighter. But there was nothing there to give her away.

'Just as well,' she thought. 'It would never do for anyone to see a change. How lucky it is that our hearts are hidden deep—that they are not really worn on our sleeves. That would never do!'

V

When Edwina shut the field gate behind her and stepped down into the lane, it was as if she had come into another part of the country, somewhere far from the sea. In the fields the air had been sharp and thin and moving, tasting of salt. Here, in this green tunnel, it was mild and heavy with the breath of spring. The afternoon sky rested on the high banks where leaves were in bud. The low clouds were luminous; the hidden sun shone through them with a diffused pale light. She walked slowly, as she always did in the lane. It was an ante-chamber, a corridor, joining field and cliff to the other world of the village.

To-day she walked more slowly than she usually did while the dog ran far ahead. She did not want to reach the village. She knew that it would be more difficult than it usually was to brave the curious faces waiting in the shop and she shrank from hearing the bell ring as she opened the door and the hush that would fall as she came in. Her mind was both excited and tender, that was the way it felt, tender and exposed and shrinking; as if only a touch would be enough to make it curl up and contract. She thought it strange that her body, by contrast, was for once comfortable and easy and sure of itself. She walked with her head up and her shoulders back as if she were walking to music, her mind could not hear. Her legs moved with long steps; her arms swung freely; her feet could have kept up with the dog and gone searching the hedges and running, faster and faster, over the moors, but her uneasy troubled mind kept them back.

The weight of her heavy coat was nothing to her fine shoulders; to-day she could have carried a real weight, such as that of a heavy child, for miles. Even her clothes felt exactly right. They hung loosely from her shoulders and flowed like water over her thighs. She could feel her body rippling along under their light touch.

She liked the way the skirt of the beige coat swung as she walked and that on the furry surface the new leaves caught and hung. Her hair sprang freely from her head in the pale light that was almost sunshine; it was as free as the grass growing in the hedge. She took off her glove and touched her hair; it was warm and caught at her fingers. 'The trouble with me is that I think too much,' she told herself. 'I will give up thinking, anyway, until I reach the village, and just be.'

She looked up at the tall banks. Now they seemed to melt, to disappear into the sky. Lane and sky swam in a gold mist; nothing was clearly seen, even the bare branches of the trees looked soft and undefined. She saw that the primroses were out. Yesterday, the

buds had been tightly closed, but now the pale yellow flowers were wide open in the pearly light. She put her gloves in her pocket and plunged her fingers into the grass. The dog hurried back to see what she was doing and they ran from bank to bank together.

The pink stems were cold, and when she held the flowers to her face they were cold too, and smelled of sweetness. She sighed with happiness and now she wanted to open her coat and her blouse and crush the flowers against her breast. Holding a tight bunch of the flowers against her cheek, she took a petal gently between her lips and shut her eyes.

The car was almost on her before she heard it. She had time only to drop the flowers and seize the dog before she threw herself back against the bank. It was a Staff car painted in browns and greens, and in the narrow lane it looked large and dark and sudden. It passed so close to her that the mudguard touched her skirt. She looked for a second into the face of the man sitting beside the driver. He was past her almost at once, but the impression of the face between the officer's cap and the collar of the white waterproof was like a blow. She knew that she would recognize the red moustache and cold blue eyes anywhere.

When the car had disappeared down the lane, brushing the grass on the banks and swerving on the rough surface of the road, she put the dog down on the ground and began to pick up the flowers. Her knees were trembling and she knew that her face was red with anger.

'The mannerless young brute,' she thought. 'How dare he drive at that dangerous rate in these narrow lanes.' She could not get the impression of the man's face out of her mind. 'He enjoyed it,' she thought. 'It amused him to see me scrambling out from under his wheels like a flurried hen. If I had been a young and pretty girl it would have been very different.' She put the flowers together with shaking fingers. 'Why have I picked these now?' she thought. 'I

shall have to carry them all the way to the village and back again. What a fool I am!

She fastened the dog's lead to his collar and, putting the flowers into her shopping bag, walked on down the lane. But now she walked clumsily. She felt large and heavy—a large awkward woman in an unbecoming coat.

She saw the cold blue eyes again. They had passed over her as if she had been a lump of mud, or a cow. 'A man like that would have a quick eye for a girl,' she thought. 'He would not have looked at me like that when I was twenty. And after all this is the same me. What did I have then that I have not got now? Can twenty years make all that difference?' "Of course," she said aloud in the quiet lane, "every year something dies."

As she walked on, absently touching the grasses on the bank and pulling at the leaf buds, she thought, 'I didn't like that man's face. What was he doing in the lane? He might have been going to the Farm or down the steep way to the Cove, but why should he come this way? I have never seen a car in the lane before.'

She suddenly stood still. 'Could that car have been here for a definite purpose?' she asked herself. 'Was it looking for someone?'

Clasping her hands together distractedly she looked down the lane. "What shall I do?" she said. "Shall I go back? Everyone is against us. They will take him away if they can." She began to run back down the lane, dragging the dog behind her, but after a moment or two she stopped again. "I mustn't be stupid," she said. "They can know nothing. I must go on as I planned."

Taking her gloves out of her pocket, she put them on carefully and tightened the belt of her coat. 'I must remember that he depends on me for everything,' she told herself. 'Yes, I hold his life in my hand. What good would a bit of a girl be to him now?'

She lifted her chin and put her shoulders back and walked on with her arms swinging.

The lane ended at the cross-roads where an old grey stone stood in a patch of grass. She waited, as she always did, to let the dog lift his leg against the stone and enjoy for a moment the dogs who had been there before him. The village lay below her in the valley. Its grey roofs shone as if a shower of rain had just passed over them.

It was an ugly village. The houses were built of stone and were meanly shaped with small windows and narrow eaves. The largest building was Mabey's garage and that was only a big shed with a tin roof; from the hill she could see the wheelless Ford chassis in the yard and one lonely petrol pump. The only strong colour to be seen was the clump of daffodils in Mrs. Mabey's garden; this blazed up at her from the edge of the stream, but the Inn was the only attractive house in the village; she had lived there not unhappily for a month. The windows at the back looked out at the stream and at the front was a painted sign—a gold Ring of Bells.

The narrow road went from where she stood down into the valley, across the bridge and up the opposite hill. Half the village, including the shop, which was also the post office, was at the top of the steep slope, and the other, with the inn, was at the bottom, round the stone bridge and along the stream; the church was a mile away by itself over the ridge of the moors. After the first few days she had spent there the village had seemed to her as difficult and unaccommodating as its cold, unfriendly people. But the valley, like all Cornish valleys, was deep and green and tender. Looking down on to it she thought, as she had often done before, 'It is like a green velvet jeweller's case, holding in its satin hollow, instead of a diamond star or cluster, a few rough grey pebbles.' The stream wound away under its tunnel of willow and hazel; the beeches were the colour of early spring; the tilted fields went steeply up to join the moors on the skyline. Immediately below her, on the parapet of the bridge, an old man was leaning. She could have dropped a stone on to his old blue cap.

'I don't want to go down into the village,' she thought. 'How do I know what is waiting for me in the shop?' She thought of the officer in the car again. 'He may have already searched the village,' she told herself.

The houses and the empty road seemed to her to be suspiciously quiet and deserted. Even the smoke going straight up from the chimneys below her had an unnatural furtive air. 'Perhaps the old man has been put on the bridge to give warning of my coming,' she thought, but as she hesitated she saw the square shape of Mrs. Mabey come out of the inn and begin to take her washing from the clothes line. 'How foolish I am being,' she told herself sharply. 'If anything were happening up at the shop, Mrs. Mabey would be the first there. Now I must pull myself together. The sooner I go down this hill the sooner I shall be climbing it again.'

Holding the dog's lead tightly in one hand and her bag in the other, she walked quickly down the hill, over the bridge, and up the road to the shop.

The bell jangled loudly as she opened the door. She had never heard it without a sudden lowering of her resistance, a cold shrinking, and to-day the sound seemed sharper than usual, as if the bell were shrilling: "I say, all of you, pay attention! Look who is here!" She shut the door behind her and the ringing stopped, but now everyone in the shop was looking at her.

At first she thought that the shop was crowded and that everyone stopped talking as she came in. Then she saw that, counting herself, there were only ten people there—Mr. and Mrs. Buse, Flora, Gracie, two village women, a man in a cloth cap, a woman in a blue coat, and a young soldier. None of these people took any notice of her, except for Mrs. Buse, who gave her a quick nod.

The shop was close after the fresh air in the village, and it was cold with a different sort of coldness. There was the usual unpleasant smell of soap and damp cardboard and raw meat. The

light was grey and uncertain, a tricky light that showed nothing to its best advantage. Already, as she advanced towards the counter, she felt in some way lessened, but at the same time physically larger, so that her worst features were accentuated and her best made absurd. The Buse family always made her feel like this, and there behind the counter they were waiting, their cold eyes watchful, their pointed chins and sharp fingers ready, ready to scuttle at a touch down the ladders of their web to the poor fly, the plump and silly fly.

She knew from Mrs. Mabey that the Buses were well thought of in the village as good Chapel people with a bit in the Bank, although the village did not think much of Flora's free way with the boys. To her they had always seemed like a family of grey spiders, and to-day she saw them with a new sharpness. 'They are really dangerous,' she thought. 'They peer and poke about and never rest until they know everything—until they have sucked the poor fly dry.'

Mrs. Buse and Flora were busy with their customers, so she sat down on one of the two small long-legged chairs to wait. She could see Mr. Buse at the back of the shop; he was a stout man who seldom spoke to anyone and his place in the shop, among the dead rabbits and the meat, was as clearly defined as Gracie's, who was fixed to her stool behind that part of the counter which was also the post office. Through the brass grill she could see Gracie cleaning her nails with a pen-nib; she looked harmless enough in her red jersey and horn-rimmed glasses, but she knew that Gracie's small flat face was avid with curiosity and that the black eyes missed nothing; at that moment they were busy taking in every detail of Miss Marsh to-day.

She moved her chair and, taking the primroses out of her bag, began to arrange them in bunches with their heads tightly together. The dog leant against her knees and she knew that he shared her uneasiness. He did not like the shop. She could feel his muscles

twitching nervously and she put her hand on his head to calm him. Looking round she thought, 'A village shop should be a pleasant place, cheerful and busy with a sense of its own importance, because it is the centre of the village. It should also be full of kindness and country talk and country humour, as varied as its own stock of bacon and cheese, nails and coils of rope, patent medicines, artificial manures, rolls of cloth, buckets, brooms, biscuits, and picture post-cards of beauty spots. But this place is mean and spiteful. It is not only because of the war that everything displayed is poor and meagre and cold. It is grudging and malicious and a little nasty, although every corner shows the same efficiency, the same scrubbed cleanliness and unloving order.'

'All this,' she thought, 'proceeds from Mrs. Buse. There she sits in the centre of the web and from that squat body has been drawn the spokes of the web—shop, daughters. Yes, there sits the dark, cold, heart of the village.'

She turned her head cautiously towards the counter. Mrs. Buse was dealing in her efficient way with her customers. Her hands ran quickly over the shelves in search of a tin or a packet. Her big head turned from side to side sending her pale grey glance into every corner of the shop. She was so short that her bust, which was surprisingly large and abrupt, rested on the counter in a hard, blue-and-white covered curve. Her sandy-grey hair was rolled into tight curls and fastened with tortoiseshell slides. 'The woman is evil,' she thought suddenly. 'I feel that I must be careful not to look at her directly and that I should be wise to cross my fingers when she looks at me.'

'Does anyone else notice anything out of the way about Mrs. Buse?' she wondered. Madge, she remembered, had thought her a competent woman. 'Was there something in herself, something twisted and wrong that saw at once the worst in everybody? But until to-day, I only disliked her,' she thought unhappily. 'She

made me uncomfortable because she always made me feel a fool. It is only now, to-day, that I understand her—that I recognize——’

She looked quickly round the shop at the other people there. To her relief she found nothing out of the ordinary about them. ‘And this woman,’ she thought, ‘who is talking to Mrs. Buse in her soft Cornish voice, seems to me to be altogether wholesome, good and kind. I feel I must smile when I look at her and that if my hands were cold I could warm them against her. It makes me feel better to look at her. I am sure she is a farmer’s wife. About her is an atmosphere of milk and cream and feather beds. Her coat is good and thick and her hair shines with health. At home, in her grey farm, there is, I am sure, a covey of children which increases every year, which includes always a baby at the breast. You see,’ she told herself, ‘there is nothing wrong with me. I can still recognize goodness when I see it. But I am right about Mrs. Buse, and I know that when this woman has gone there will be one shield the less between the Buses and me. Yes, the feeling of unkindness in the village flows from Mrs. Buse and perhaps from Flora—and I have not looked at Flora yet.’

She leaned forward until she could see the girl and the young soldier at the other end of the counter. Their hands were playing a game of their own over a tray of picture postcards, approaching, retreating, never touching under the eyes of her mother, but promising, hinting. Their youth shone in the dull light of the shop. She thought, for she could not help it, ‘How beautiful they are.’

The boy, in his brown-green battle-dress and clumsy boots was as young and artless as a calf. His youth and desires were plain for everyone to see. His gold head was like a flower, or like a bee hovering above the girl’s syrup-coloured curls. His expression, she saw, was both serious and delighted. His face and the back of his neck were red. She was sure that his eyes were a deep trusting blue.

"Come away," she longed to say to him. "You will do yourself no good there."

Staring at the girl she thought, 'It is quite right that a young girl should be like a pot of honey, sweet, inviting, bringing all the eager bees round, that is right. But here there is no honey, only a deception, a sugared bait, a trap for silly bees. That white anæmic face with the too small mouth, those swimming pale eyes, those curls as smooth as brass, those thin white wrists—what good will they be to him?' She called silently across the shop to him, 'Can't you see that all is thin, cheap, unkind?'

'If it isn't this boy it will be another,' she thought. 'That girl will never be alone. But this boy is too good for her. It isn't fair. She is the kind who gives nothing and takes everything. At this moment I know exactly what she is like. Now I understand.'

Across the space between them she made a last furious appeal to the boy. 'Can't you see?' she cried to him silently. 'Can't you see that the girl is poison?'

It was very quiet in the shop. She looked round. The farmer's wife had gone. Except for the soldier she was alone in the shop with the Buses. Mrs. Buse, on the other side of the counter, was looking at her with a strange expression on her face.

"Yes, Miss Marsh?" said Mrs. Buse.

They were all staring at her and she knew that Mrs. Buse must have spoken to her several times.

"Is anything wrong, Miss Marsh?" said Mrs. Buse. "You look queer like—are you ill?"

She shook her head and stood up, dropping her flowers, and fumbled in her purse for her shopping list and ration book. They were not there, and now she could not remember a thing she wanted. No one spoke. They stood still and looked at her. In all her life she had never felt so much alone. They were all massed against her; no one moved, but she could feel them drawing solidly

together. She stood in front of them helplessly, moving her head a little from side to side in her distress. In their faces she saw nothing, except a look of cold expectancy and, at that moment, she knew what it was like to be the baited bear in the pit, the bull in the arena, the sentenced gladiator. 'No, no,' she thought, 'nothing so dramatic—only the Aunt Sally at the village fair.' She heard a smothered giggle from one of the girls, and, as she swung round, she saw that the young soldier was standing beside her. She looked at him suspiciously, but his blue eyes were innocent and kind; they looked trustfully into her face, seeing nothing unusual, accepting simply everything they saw.

"Dropped your flowers, Miss," he said in a boy's husky voice.

As she took the flowers from him she saw Flora watching her. The girl's face might have been a mirror. In it she saw exactly what she looked like at that moment. Her hair, she now knew, was coming down, her coat was covered with grass stains and leaves, on her cheek was a smear of mud. She looked a large untidy foolish woman. 'I can't blame them,' she thought. 'I look a suitable butt for their wit, for their fine old country love of fun at the expense of something weak and defenceless. I mustn't blame them. They are only following the human instinct to stone, hunt down, and destroy anything that is a little less or a little more than themselves. I must try and remember that the fault is mine for appearing as I do'; but as she thought this she was filled with a quick mounting tide of anger. She felt herself changing and darkening as she shook with a new and secret rage.

She pulled her gloves off and laid them together on the counter, and, while they watched her, slowly pinned up her hair, and straightened her scarf. When she spoke it was in a new voice, one she had never used before. The words came easily as did the cold insolent tone. Something inside herself stood apart and listened and

exulted, as if the words she was using were arrows which could give sharp, stinging wounds.

"You are very busy here to-day, Mrs. Buse," she said. "I have never seen so many people in this little place before. I have been waiting such a time that I have almost forgotten what I came for. But please don't apologize, it's such a lovely day that my dog and I have been for a long walk and we are quite glad to sit down and rest. I am a little tired. No, please don't worry—I always think it's wonderful how you manage. Of course, you are lucky to have your daughters to help you these days. Poor Gracie, of course, but Flora? Oh, a doctor's certificate? That explains it, and anyone could see at a glance how anæmic she is. What was I saying? Oh yes, how well you manage—of course it isn't a big place, but I have never seen the shop really empty, and you, Mrs. Buse, never seem at a loss for anything. In all this muddle of things you never take more than ten minutes to lay your hand on anything you want. Now let me see—my rations please, and is that actually a tin of cornflour up there on the top shelf? The label is so dirty I can't read it."

She saw the girls flush. Flora shuffled her feet and looked sullen. The soldier was looking at her in a puzzled way. But the arrows fell defeated from the iron curve of Mrs. Buse's apron. She merely inclined her head and listened as if she were thinking, 'Ah, that's better. That's more like it. That's the sort of thing I understand.' Her grey eyes were shining and in them was a new expression, one almost of respect.

The shopping list and the book were in her bag after all. "Now, Mrs. Buse," she said, "can you let me have all these? I expect to be very busy the next few days and I don't want to waste my time trailing backwards and forwards to the village, so I will use all my points now. I could go into Bodmin by 'bus, but you really have quite a good stock for such a little place in war-time, and I always think it's better to deal with the local people, if I can. Have you

really got that? Now isn't that wonderful? But I have always said it's in the funny little places that you find things hidden away."

She was surprised to find that Mrs. Buse, for some reason of her own, was encouraging her. Flora was ordered up the ladder to the top shelf and Mr. Buse to the storeroom at the back of the shop.

"You will never carry all that, Miss Marsh," said Mrs. Buse suddenly. "You are not looking too well yet. Is there anything we can do? I promised Miss Selby to look out for you. You leave those potatoes and the dog's food. I will send Flora up with them to-morrow."

Her fine new rage collapsed about her. Mrs. Buse had defeated her with one thrust, one sharp prick. Had she guessed anything? What could she know? As she stared down at Mrs. Buse, all she could think of to say was, "Oh, no, no. I am all right. You mustn't do that. Not on any account. And you mustn't listen to Miss Selby. She fusses over me. I like to be left alone—I mean, it's too far. I wouldn't think of troubling you."

She saw at once that she had only made things worse. The expression on Mrs. Buse's face sharpened, became alert and eager. Flora's eyes opened wider.

"The walk would do the girl good," said Mrs. Buse in her deliberate way. "You were saying yourself how pale she was. She doesn't get enough fresh air. You would like to go, Flora, now wouldn't you?"

"It's a way," said Flora, looking down at the counter. "But I have never seen the inside of the house. I wouldn't mind going up there some time."

They would see that she was not defeated so easily. Her anger rose to meet the danger. 'How kind of you, Mrs. Buse,' she said. 'Then come and have tea with me to-morrow, Flora, and I will

show you all over the house. Well, in that case, I will leave something for Flora to bring along. My bag is a bit heavy."

"Can't go to-morrow," said Flora, looking at her mother. "Can't go this week neither. You know I can't, Mum, I have too much on. We are going into Bodmin to-morrow."

"You will go when I tell you, my girl," said Mrs. Buse. "We will let you know later what day will suit, Miss Marsh. I will send you a note by Mrs. Penny at the farm. Perhaps I'll be along too, although I did see the place once when Mr. Stanton was there."

"Any time, of course," she said as lightly as she could. "Only let me know or I might be out, and I would like to have some tea ready for you. Now, could you spare me a bit of string for my flowers? And could you possibly change a pound note?"

'This is the only thing to do,' she thought. 'Forewarned is forearmed.' Her hands were trembling and she felt a little giddy but she counted her change carefully before she put it into her purse. Looking up she saw an expression she did not understand pass across Mrs. Buse's face. Then, as she put on her gloves, she knew what it meant. It was a look of recognition, of greeting, as if something lying deep in Mrs. Buse had recognized and saluted a kindred something in herself.

'And this wasn't in me yesterday,' she thought. She felt sick and faint. She longed for the clean air outside the shop, but she forced herself to unwind the dog's lead from the chair and to pick up her bag in an unhurried way. Sustained again by her secret rage, she managed to smile and to nod good-bye to each of them in turn before she pulled the door open and left the shop.

The village street was empty except for a bicycle propped against the stone horse-trough. The doors of the grey houses were shut. Behind the houses the bare moors joined the grey sky. The light in the clouds had gone. Everything looked colourless, grey, cold, and sad with approaching evening. In the valley mist lay close above the stream.

'I must hurry,' she thought, but the bag was heavy and she was tired. 'What a mess I made of it,' she thought, looking at the closed grey houses. 'I couldn't have done worse.'

'I hate this village,' she thought suddenly. 'Why did I choose to live here? I hate this mean, grey stone, this crooked street. It is an ugly, evil place.'

Tears came into her eyes, but she dismissed them angrily. 'Don't be a fool,' she told herself. 'This village is the same as any other village, no better and no worse. As for what happened in the shop, it is the best thing that could have happened. The shop is the gossiping heart of the village, the centre of any possible suspicion, and now someone is coming by invitation from the shop to the house. But they are not coming without warning. My plans will be ready to meet the danger. Flora will go back to report that the house was empty, quite empty except for Miss Marsh and her spaniel. Asking Flora to the house was really a brilliant move.' But she did not feel any happier.

She went over the scene in the shop again and again. 'Why can't I leave it alone?' she asked herself. 'It is done now, it is finished. I behaved very badly,' she thought. 'I am ashamed. I sank to Mrs. Buse's level. And it was stupid of me to lose my temper. Look how it has taken it out of me.'

As she crossed the bridge, she thought, 'That isn't true. Nothing has gone out of me. I have no feeling of release, none of the emptiness that follows violence. On the contrary, I am heavy, heavy.'

The old man had gone from the bridge. She was glad that he was not there. She wished that she need never see a human face again. She thought of the young soldier, and for a moment she felt comforted. 'But he was stupid,' she thought. 'As good as gold, good as sunshine, but stupid, stupid.'

As she climbed the hill, she panted as if she were carrying a heavy

load. 'I am not myself,' she thought. 'I am over-tired. I need my tea. The sooner I get home the better.'

Even the word 'home' could not comfort her. She was not herself. She knew it and the knowledge filled her with a vague horror. 'Then what am I?' she thought. 'I am not the Edwina I was this time yesterday—she would never have made such a scene in the village. Something has changed me. No, not changed,' she corrected herself. 'The old Edwina is still there, but something has been added, something dark and still and cold, something that Mrs. Buse recognized. What is it?'

She no longer felt the weight of the bag in her hand. The weight was in herself. She thought that she could feel something lying in a dark coil in the centre of her body. And now her legs were inadequate—they could not carry this great weight up the hill.

She had reached the top of the hill and was standing by the old stone. She must have come up the hill far too fast. Her heart was pounding, but her moment of panic was over. Behind her the stone was real and solid; she leant gratefully against it. The scene in the shop was growing vague; she did not worry about it any more. She was too tired to worry about anything. She could not remember ever feeling so tired before.

The hedges were fading round her, sinking back into the fields. Everything was changing. Fields and sky had taken on the dim colours of evening. The three roads that met at the stone were three pale ribbons going away from her into unknown country; even the entrance of the lane looked unfamiliar. She could not remember letting the dog off the lead, but there he was, hurrying away from her; she could just see his black shape disappearing between the tall banks.

"Wait for me, James," she called, but he took no notice. Picking up the bag she walked slowly after him.

'I am tired,' she thought. 'I need my tea.' But she was not only

tired. The sad grey evening, the high unfriendly banks, the weight of the bag, were too much for her. 'And it was just here that I met the car,' she thought, and, as she remembered that hard white face under the officer's cap, she wanted to cry. 'Even the dog has deserted me,' she thought. 'I have never been so much alone.'


To comfort herself as she sometimes did when she was very unhappy and lonely, when everything else had failed her, and when there was no one to see or hear her, she held her hand out, bending her arm at the elbow a little and curling her fingers as if she were holding the hand of a small child. "Nearly there," she said, in the voice she kept for these occasions. It was a low voice, almost a whisper, so that if anyone happened to hear her they would think she was humming a small private tune or, at the worst, only talking to herself.

"That's right. That's the way," she said. "You are a good boy to have walked so far on your little legs, but it's not much further now. You hold on to my hand and then we will soon be there. For your tea you shall have biscuits with sugar on them as well as your glass of milk. Now, let me see—what colour is your hair to-day? Gold like a flower or like a bee? That would be nice, but it never works, does it? Golden boys are not for me. You are always dark, a quiet, dark little boy. To-day your head is curly like the head of a black lamb. How old are you this evening? I think you have grown up a little. I think that you are four years old to-day."

It was working better than it usually did, and this was strange because the dog was not there. It generally needed the dog as a link, a starting-point. She could almost see the child walking at her side. His black head came to a level close below her waist. She was not tired any more, but at the height of his head, where it would touch her if he leant against her, to the left and a little below her navel, was a sudden sharp pain as if a dark small head had pressed into her side, butted into her side like a dark, quick little goat. She sighed

with happiness. And now, here was the rough part of the road and the big puddle left over from last night's rain. "Be careful," she said. "Hold my hand. You mustn't get your feet wet." She could have sworn, as she saw the gate and the path leading to the cliffs, that for a second on her palm she felt the touch of warm soft fingers. "Edwina," she said loudly, "Edwina! Be careful. Don't go too far."

When she came out on to the fields, she saw that here the day had waited. The fields were in shadow, but the cliff-edge was still sharp against the sea. Her heart leapt as she saw the house. The walls shone as if they had gathered up and stored the last light from the fields and sea and sky. The house glowed, pulsed, like a pearl, or like a shell that was incandescent with life. Nothing else mattered. Everything she needed was here—everything. Here was home.



PART
THREE

THE WIND WAS UP AND MOVING ROUND THE HOUSE. IT CAME from the sea and with the rain tore inland across the fields, crying and calling as it went. It found the house and beat at the walls and roof and plucked at the windows. The house stood firm. It presented a smooth unbroken surface to the night; the wind streamed like water over and round it and rushed on defeated. In the black spaces of the night the lamplit circle in the sitting-room, where the two armchairs were drawn close to the fire, was an oasis of peace and warmth and comfort.

‘I wish that the wind would blow more fiercely, that it would rage and storm,’ thought Edwina. ‘To-night I should like to think that this is the only safe warm lit spot left on all the earth.’

She put her head back on the cushion and through half-closed eyes looked at her sitting-room. It seemed smaller than it had done yesterday. The walls had taken a step forward as if they wanted to make sure of keeping the room a particular and private place. The fire was burning more eagerly; the curtains were clinging to the windows as if they were determined not to let one breath of night penetrate into the room; everything in the room was conspiring to draw the two of them together in a close warm circle.

‘How different the room seemed this time yesterday,’ she thought, ‘but then of course I was alone.’

Looking across the hearthrug she saw that the newspaper she had brought him from the village had fallen from his hand. His legs were stretched out on the cushioned stool. Although the marks of

exhaustion and strain were still on his face he looked at ease and at peace. His eyes were shut, but she knew that he was not asleep; every now and then he slowly opened them to look at her.

'If anyone could look through those tightly-drawn curtains into the sitting-room, what a domestic scene they would see,' she thought. 'Here we sit, one on each side of the fireplace, he with his slippers and newspaper, I with my book and knitting, the dog curled up on the hearthrug between us and the lamplight falling peacefully over us all. We must look, in this dim light, as if we had sat here for years together, as if there was by now nothing we did not know about each other, as if upstairs, asleep in its bed, was a child or even two or three. This is the right scene to see through a sitting-room window. This is as it ought to be.'

She sighed, and thought, 'How very different the truth is. Here sit two strangers, a middle-aged woman and a man who, whatever he is or is not, is far from being tame and domestic. This room is the room of a lonely foolish woman who does not understand, any more than the hen bird does who has hatched out the cuckoo's egg, how her home came to hold anything so outsize, strange, and wild.'

She looked across the hearthrug again. 'But what is this other presence in the room?' she asked herself suddenly. 'I have pretended for some time that it was not here. What is it that waits in the dark corners, in the shadows by the bookshelves, behind the chairs? I have felt it all day. Now I can almost see it. I am afraid that in a moment it will appear. It is something dark and dangerous and cold.'

The lamplight seemed to grow dimmer. She shivered and put her hands on the arms of her chair. 'I won't see it,' she thought. 'It isn't here. I am imagining things again.'

She looked at him beseechingly, but he did not stir. His eyes were wide open. They looked almost black and under them were the deep half circles of shadow which gave him the exhausted

suffering look. 'How tired he still is,' she thought. 'What must he have been through to look like that. He looks, not only like someone who has been driven beyond his endurance, but about him is this strange look of being set apart and breathing another air.'

'Outcast,' she thought suddenly. 'That means someone who has been thrown out from the companionship of ordinary people and put beyond the pale for ever, like Cain.'

As she stared at him he moved his head sharply and the light changed on his face, showing the high cheekbones and the strong eyebrows. Now it was another face, older and a little forbidding. She sank back into her chair again and told herself, 'I am letting my imagination run away with me. What are these melodramatic expressions I have been using? "Beyond the pale"—what a ridiculous thing to say—why, I don't even know what it means!'

The shadow seemed to lift from the room as if someone had slowly turned up the lamp. The room was its warm comfortable self again. As she took up her knitting she thought, 'At first it seemed an easy face to look at but that was only a blind, that was the mask. He doesn't put that on any longer with me. The face underneath is far from easy. It is never the same face. For instance, when I came back from the village this evening and found the door into the hall unlocked and went into the garage where he was standing against the wall in the growing darkness with the box of matches ready in his hand, the face he turned to me was so white and drawn and wild that no one could have blamed me for running to him and putting my arms round him as I would have done to a desolate child. Then at supper he looked a different person, someone young and hard and gay. Sitting across the table from me in the kitchen, he looked as if he knew something about me that I didn't know myself. I didn't like that look. All the same,' she thought, 'I am glad that I persuaded him to sit here by the fire. It is quite safe and it would have been cold in the bedroom. Yes, I am happy

with him here beside me, although for the last hour he hasn't said a word.'

She looked up at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was time for the News, but she did not mean to touch the wireless until he asked for it. For this one night, at least, she meant to keep the house as close and undisturbed as if it were indeed a shell filled with its own intense sufficient life. 'To-morrow will be soon enough to plan and make decisions,' she told herself. 'There will be plenty to do to-morrow, but I shall keep to-night for my shut-in private thoughts and feelings. If I have to think at all it shall be only of happy intimate things—nothing shall spoil to-night for me if I can help it.' She settled herself firmly in her chair and crossed her feet on the fender.

'Supper was a success,' she thought comfortably. 'The kitchen looked cheerful. I am glad that I put out that new cloth, it was the same colour as my dress. It is a gay warm colour. I am glad I put the dress on after all. It seemed strange to be actually wearing one of the dresses from the box and I was afraid the colour was too bright and young for me although, when I looked in the glass, it seemed to become me.'

She lifted her arm and looked at the full-gathered sleeve. 'Red is a wonderful colour,' she thought. 'Rubies are red and roses. Red is the colour of life and hope and excitement, of fire and youth and love. In some oriental countries it is worn by brides. They drape themselves in scarlet and paint a red mark on their foreheads.' As she thought this she saw a picture of a little blood-red figure waiting with outstretched arms under an enormous moon. 'But here there is no such moon,' she thought. 'Such a moon is only seen on the other side of the world. I can't expect it to shine for me.'

She lifted her head and turned towards him. He was asleep. She saw that it would have made no difference to him if she had not been there. All he needed was somewhere safe and warm where he

could rest. 'I knew that you did not mean what you said to me at supper,' she cried to him silently. 'When you said that you had never felt so easy with anyone before, that you felt as if you had found something you had needed all your life—like a cold hand finding its glove or a ball its socket—when you said this you were only making sure of me. You didn't mean what I, like a fool, had almost begun to hope you meant.'

As if she had spoken out loud he answered her at once in a low, dragging voice. His eyes were shut and she could not be sure that he was not still asleep.

"You belong to me, don't you?" he said. "You know that you do, I don't have to tell you. You and I fit. It's funny, I shouldn't have thought it. I didn't want it this way, but there it is and we both know it, we've known it all the time. I've no need to move from this chair to come closer to you. I don't have to trouble to put out my hand to touch you."

He lifted his hand and made a vague stroking movement in the air. She saw the shadow of his hand and arm move on the wall beside him and drop away, and at the same time she felt a caress, a slow light touch on her neck and arm. She started and drew back in the chair.

"You see, I don't have to do anything," he said. "You are no trouble, not like a girl always wanting and asking. That suits me. I'm tired, tired out. Good for nothing, finished. But we have no need to do anything. It's all done. We couldn't get closer."

She leant her head against the cushion and shut her eyes. 'He is asleep,' she told herself. 'He doesn't know what he is saying,' but a drowsy heavy peace was creeping along her limbs. Through her eyelids she could see the dancing shapes of the flames, their change of shade and light. Her body felt heavy and numb and yet it was invaded by a painful sweetness, a sharp joy. She was dissolving in the chair, melting away, falling away, until there was nothing left except a quivering core of light.

For her a wide gold moon was rising. It showed her all that she had never had, all that she had dreamed. It shone on dark-warmed tropic seas: the palm trees moved their black and silver fringes; the sands stretched golden under the moon; a thousand little streams ran singing into the sand. It shone on to a balcony high above a sleeping town where the shadows were made of black-scented lace and among the orange trees a voice sang below a barred window that the night would last for ever, for ever and ever. But the moon, the bridal moon, rising higher, carried her far from these imagined lands, carried her where she had never been even in her dreams. She saw dark still rooms where the dawn came too early under the curtains, and rooms shuttered against the afternoon sun where the ceilings were pools of deep blue shadow. She knew breathless closeness and peace as deep as the sea. Her golden moon was gone, but this was a calm warm sea where her body floated like a boat, a long white boat moving slowly across blue water, rising and falling to the waves, coming steadily homewards, low in the water with its heavy cargo. . . .

She opened her eyes. The hands on the clock face had barely moved. 'I have been dreaming,' she thought, but she knew that she had not slept. 'Don't try and understand,' she told herself. 'Don't spoil it—accept it gratefully.' But while she still looked at the clock on the mantelpiece, she was no longer certain what it was she must accept.

'I only know that I was right to do as I have done since that first evening,' she thought. 'Perhaps, after all, we sometimes recognize our need when we meet it, however unlikely it may appear. Perhaps once in our lives we do what is most necessary for ourselves.'

She leant forward and lifted the tongs and quietly, so as not to disturb him, for she saw that he was now asleep in the chair with his head turned towards the wall, she put another piece of coal on

the fire. 'I will sleep in my chair too,' she thought. 'I feel as if I could sleep for years. But first I must make sure, from the expression on his face, that he is as happy and at peace as I am.'

Standing up she quietly crossed the hearthrug and leant on the back of his chair. His hands were lying palm upwards on his thighs. His mouth was a little open. On his forehead and round his nostrils were a few beads of sweat. She wanted to lift the lashes that touched the high cheekbones and to take a quick look at his eyes. 'That is the only way I shall know,' she thought.

As if her thought had touched him he frowned and his lips came together. A tremor ran down his body and twitched the foot in the red slipper. "I am sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I know that no one, however dear and close, should look at anyone who is sleeping. There—I will leave you alone." But she still hung over him as closely as she dared until his head was under the arch of her breast. 'You need not mind me,' she thought. 'Now you and I are the same person.'

She looked from his sleeping face round the quiet room; at her gold curtains, the firelight shining on her polished furniture, at the dog sleeping on the hearthrug. 'I am happy,' she cried silently, 'whatever happens—I am happy now.'

In the warm silence of the room he said loudly and distinctly, "One good jab into the neck, there, just below the ear—that will do it."

The words were loose in the room. There was nothing she could do to bring them back. She looked up as if she expected to see a cold weight of darkness bearing down on her from the ceiling, but nothing in the room had changed. The lamp still shone. The fire burned.

As she leant over him she saw that his face was convulsed. The eyebrows drew together and the mouth jerked. Sweat lay in the deep lines in the forehead. She could not make out any words

among the sounds that now came from his mouth, but as she watched he lifted his hands in a brief terrible pantomime.

"No, no!" she cried. "Stop it. I can't bear it."

At once the hoarse sounds were cut off. The hands fell back on to his knees. He opened his eyes and, looking up into her face, said in a sleepy voice, "What is it? What's the matter? Oh, it's you."

He put his arm up and pulled her round the chair until his head was against her breast. "I'm tired," he said, "but I'll rest better like this. This is what I needed."

She thought that he had fallen asleep again and she kept still, half standing, half crouching, against his chair, turning her head away from him. But almost at once he lifted his head and said: "I have been dreaming—a horrible dream. Did I say anything?"

She could not answer. As she stood rigidly in the circle of his arm she knew that the room had become a strange cold place. Never again would it be complete and whole and warm about them. The walls were an illusion of safety. The house was wide open to every wind that blew.

"So I did say something," he said. "I see——"

He took his arm away from her but she stayed where she was, leaning against his chair and staring at the mantelpiece above his head.

"Why look like that?" he said. "You knew it all along, didn't you?"

She shook her head. Raising his voice he said angrily, "Don't you pretend to me. You knew it right from the beginning when you saw blood on the gloves. You knew it then."

"I didn't know," she said. "I only wondered. I didn't want to know."

"You meant to get it all out of me from the first," he said. "No one but you could have got it from me. You and your soft warm giving ways—you laid yourself wide open and waited."

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "I have done nothing."

"You don't need to do anything," he said. "It was like that from the first. Out there on the cliffs—I had to come, didn't I? Answer me, can't you? Could I have helped it?"

Now she was frightened of him as she had not been before. His eyes shone as he stared at her and there were patches of red on his cheekbones. She wanted to rush out of the room and out of the house into the wind and the night, but he caught hold of her hand and held it firmly.

"Did I have to come here?" he said. "Did I? You should know."

As she looked down at him all she felt was pity and a wave of sadness that flowed over her and left her drained and acquiescent.

"Yes," she said gently, "you had to come, didn't you? And I had to let you in. That was decided long ago. There was nothing else we could do. But let us leave it at that. I don't want to see any further."

"No one can go on always alone," he said, as if she had not spoken. "Maybe it was a lucky break for me in more than one way, finding you here. You and I fit. We go together—like black and white, like hot and cold. If I want to sleep quiet again I must tell it all to you and get rid of the whole thing. I'll be better when I have told it. It will be like getting rid of a lot of dirty water. I'll go lighter after it."

He put his hand over her wrist and said, more gently, "You are cold. You are shivering. Put something on the fire; make a blaze. And come and sit down where I can see you and keep my hand on you. You have asked for it and you are going to get it. You are going to hear every word of it, all the important things and the little no account things, everything, every wrinkle, if it takes till morning."

She pulled her hand away and said loudly, "I don't want to hear. Don't make me listen."

"Sit down," he said. "You are going to hear it. You are going

where I have been. I want to make you see it happen—as if you had been there.”

“It began at the camp,” he said.

Edwina listened.

“It was a camp like any other,” he said, “but the men had been there too long.”

There was the camp: Nissen huts, duckboards, rows and rows of latrines. There had been time to dig flowerbeds round the huts and to put stones along the edges of the muddy paths, and time for everything else, but the worst part of the camp was the hills. They were small hills, but they were too close. The huts were right under them, and they shut out the sky. The men hated those hills. “God blast the useless so-and-so’s,” they would say. “What use are they shutting out the only air we have?” And it was surprising how close it could be even in winter in the valley where the camp was.

‘Yes,’ she thought, ‘I see the camp.’

“Six months I had of that camp before I got the letter,” he said. “It was from my partner, from Mike Stewart, and it said in a round-about way, ‘Ross, get out of what you are doing. Get back over here, even if you have to swim for it. It is the real thing this time. This is the big money. This is where we make out. Boy, this is it.’ I knew at once that he meant it. You could trust Mike. He was big and fat and slow-moving, but there were no flies on him—he had more sense than to get mixed up in any army. Back there, in ’42—but never mind about him. All you need to know is about the letter. That was the start of it all.”

Edwina listened. ‘The start of it all,’ she thought. ‘Yes, I see the letter. I see you. I see you lying awake all night in the hut, looking through the window at those hills.’

He could not see a way out. He knew that the war might soon be over, everything pointed that way. But how could he know

that they would let him go then? How did he know that they had not thought up something else for him? How did he know that they would ever let him go? And then he would turn over in bed to get away from the hills and see everything he wanted waiting for him, the money, the excitement, everything he had always wanted but, for all the good it was to him, a million years away. Then he would put his hand under the pillow to feel if the letter were still there. At the end of a week he was no nearer to finding a way out. There he was in the camp and there he looked like staying.

"A bunch of us was waiting at the camp gates for a truck," he said. "I hadn't wanted to go but at the last I went. Anything was better than that camp, even that one-horse town."

'I see you,' Edwina thought. 'I see you standing there, waiting for the truck, stamping your feet and listening to the talk round you. I hear the men talking. I see you. I see the town.'

The town was five miles away down a muddy road. It was nothing much but the men made it as often as they could. The trucks would set them down opposite the town hall and pick them up again, no better for some beer, a cheap film, or a cheap girl.

It was fine that day. The men were restless. They stamped their feet and swore and were quick to pick quarrels. There was a lot of talk. They were saying that the Unit was to be moved—to the East, India, the Pacific. No one knew anything, but it was enough to make them excited. When the truck rolled up there were catcalls and hootings, and when they were packed inside the talk went on.

"What's the matter with Rossie?" someone said. "Look at him, he's got a face as long as a boot. What's up? Don't want to go?"

"He can't bear to leave our home from home," said someone else. "He's got real attached to No. 4 latrine, second from the left. After all this time he's afraid he won't work properly anywhere else."

And someone else said, "Ah-h, it's not the camp. The deep

attraction, boys, lies before us in the town. Don't you know our Rossie yet? He's sitting there thinking that there's at least one and a half girls he hasn't had time to get around to yet."

Ross let them talk. Would this make any difference? Would it be easier out of England? Would there be more chance from a port or from a ship? By the time the truck turned into the Square, he had made up his mind.

It was easy to shake off the rest of them. They seemed to think that he really had a date. He walked about the empty back streets trying to think. There was nothing he could do, nothing that had a chance. He looked at all those mean little houses and the grey street as if he hated them. He looked as if he would hit out at anyone who spoke to him. Suddenly he turned into a teashop where he had never been before; he wanted somewhere to sit and think. The waitress brought him some tea he did not want and two cakes on a plate and hung around.

"Like me to pour out for you, soldier?" she said. "I don't mind if I do."

There was no one else in the shop. All the tables were empty but behind a screen covered with flowered stuff someone was washing dishes. It was a dead little hole. The blinds were crooked and the cakes looked as if they were tired of waiting. The girl was a big lump, ugly. Her lower lip stuck out as if it were asking something to come along and sting it and her legs looked strong and good. But he was not interested. He had something else on his mind. She was not going to be put off easily, and she still hung around, putting her hand up behind her head. She made him angry. He said to her:

"See here, sister, I've taken hundreds like you to pieces and put them back again. You're no secret packet. I'm not playing. Buzz off."

She looked at him then in a surprised way and let her mouth hang open, showing her tongue lying on her teeth; it was red and

hot and wet. He said, "Oh, hell, why not? What else is there ever to do? Afterwards maybe I'll be more ready for a drink."

She sat down opposite him. She knew all the leads. It was odd that he had not heard of this place before. She made it plain that he looked good to her, and she gave him an idea that she was not as easy as this for everyone. He fell for it. Why not? That was the way it had always been for him. He had never had to search around.

There was a staircase going up at the back of the cake counter, but before she showed him the way she went behind the screen and whispered to someone and came out again without her apron and he followed her legs up the stairs.

The bedroom was at the back. The windows looked out over a yard where people were working. There was a noise of hammers going. She began to undress and he looked for somewhere to hang his coat. He turned round and saw that she was standing near the open window with her blouse undone and her hands rumpling her hair, looking at him with a little smile on her face.

"How much have you got on you, soldier?" she said. "Hand it over and then get out of here. I'll count ten, and if you're not gone by then I'll raise the roof. Don't try anything. The yard down there is full of workmen, and my sister is waiting in the shop. One squeak out of me and you'll have the lot of them round your ears. Come on, what about it?"

They had been paid that day and he had the money in his wallet, but not only that made him see red. "I'll go when I've had what I came up here for," he said, "and I'll give you the usual rate, not a cent more. How do you think you'll get away with a thing like this? You brought me up here, didn't you?"

"Oh, no," she said. "My sister is there to swear that you followed me in from the street and came up here after me. She knows just what to do. Look, you've torn my blouse half off me. They're

pretty hot on you boys for rape these days, aren't they? Come on now, how much have you got there? You know, if it's enough, I might change my mind about you going—you're a good-looking boy."

He stood and looked at her. This was no country girl. This one knew what she was doing. He wondered what the sister was like and how often they had got away with this before. But this time they had made a mistake. Ross Dennehay was not the usual sap.

She watched his hand as he brought out his wallet and began to count the notes. That was another mistake. She would have done better if she had kept an eye on his face. The wallet was big and heavy. He threw it underhand at her, threw it at her head. It caught her just where he meant it to and knocked her silly for a second, long enough to give him time to get his hands on her.

She was a big girl, but she did not have a chance. She never made a sound. He could not have done what he did if he had not been wild with rage, wild at the dirty trick she had played. His rage was a red mist round him. He could see nothing but red. But he knew what he was doing. He was doing to her what all those other poor fools should have done, and more.

"Oh, no!" Edwina cried. "No, no-no," but he put her hands from him without looking at her.

When he had finished with the girl he left her on the bed just as she was. He did not care if he had killed her. He did not know and he did not look to see. He was still in that red rage. She did not move while he was straightening himself and putting on his coat and picking up his wallet from the floor. And when he went to the door and opened it quietly she was still lying there on her back. What was left of her clothes would not be much use to her again or to anything larger than a mouse. The light coming in from the window would have done better to give the bed a miss.

When he came out on to the landing the staircase was dark and

quiet, but someone was moving round below in the shop. He stood in the shadows at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall, slowly buttoning his coat and getting his breath back. When he crept round the bend of the stairs, the shop was empty. Someone was moving china about behind the screen but his luck was in. He crossed the floor and went out of the door as silently as a cat streaking out behind a dustbin, and no one saw him go.

In the street outside he stopped to light a cigarette. His hands were still shaking with rage, but he was smiling. Why not? Who doesn't feel good, good and angry but good, after beating a snake's head to pulp? He shrugged his shoulders, shrugging the girl away. She was not important. She was only the turning-point, the hand that pushed him out and made him do what he most wanted to do. He threw the match away and walked down the street. Now there were no two ways about it. It would not be long before he was wanted for rape, if not for murder. Now he would have to do what the letter had told him to do.

Ross walked quickly away into a part of the town where he had never been, walking as if he knew where he was going through the grey streets. He walked with a slow lounging stride with his head up and his hands in his pockets. It was early afternoon and the streets were as empty as they would ever be. The women he met looked after him, but then women always had, and it did not worry him. He stopped at a row of poor-looking shops and went inside and bought a razor, shaving soap, a loaf of bread, a tin of soup, and, for no reason that he could have explained, a ball of string. A bit further on he slipped into an archway and examined his pockets to see what else he had on him. There was his watch, his wallet with the letter, four packets of Chesterfields, a handkerchief, a comb, matches, the hip flask of brandy he never let himself be without and the clasp-knife he always carried. All these things and the things he had just bought he crammed back into his pockets and, holding

the bread under his arm, walked on through the streets to the edge of the town.

It was as easy as that at first. He walked, that was all. He kept straight on and soon came to a bridge over a railway line and then to another bridge over a canal and then to streets of red houses standing away from each other in their own gardens, and then to some fields and some more houses, and then to nothing but the road with fields on each side. He was out of the town. He had started. Ross was to be lucky again, terribly lucky, but his first bit of luck was meeting that girl. Yes, if it hadn't been for her he would never have started. As he walked along the road he smiled again, and said to himself. 'That bitch, reckon I should be grateful to her. Reckon if I make out I will buy myself something to remember her by—a picture, a piece of hot statuary—a kind of memento. That bitch, funny how things work out.'

The road went south. In front there was nothing to be seen except trees and some hills a long way off. Along the sides of the road were hedges with gates going into the fields. A car passed him, and another, and then a lorry. He felt that it would be safer off the road. The first gate he came to was locked but he climbed over it quickly enough when he heard an army truck coming along. The hedge was thick and it hid him from the road, but on the other side the field was open. Anyone from that side could have seen him standing there against the hedge; in his uniform and badges he looked too big on the landscape. There was nothing in the field except a few cows and they were not taking any notice of him, but the open field behind him made him uneasy. It was while he was standing there that he first knew he must find himself some other clothes.

The gate into the next field was open and he went through it and round the bare ploughed field. An evening mist was rising from the ground, but it would not be dark for some hours yet. He went

carefully by the hedge, keeping his head low. But there was no one to be seen in all the fields and soon he was walking with his head up again, swinging along the line of the hedges with his confident easy stride until he nearly walked into trouble, until he had a fright.

It was lucky for him that the man was whistling as he came round the corner of the hedge. There was a deep ditch handy and he went into it like a streak and lay there while the boots went past his head. As he lay there he could see the leather leggings and the barrel of the gun and smell the pipe. When the man had gone past him he put his head up through the grasses and looked after him; he saw an old tweed coat and hat and that the man carried two dead rabbits—a farmer going home to his tea, or perhaps a game-keeper. It was luck again that he had not a dog with him and that he did not turn his head, lucky for both of them. He was shaking all over as he lay down again. It had been a near thing. No one has such luck for nothing.

It would not do to take more chances. He lay flat in that muddy ditch until it began to get dark. The mud must have soaked in through his coat; the grasses must have scratched his face. It was cold and he shivered until his teeth rattled. Now and then a lorry went by in the distance on the road. Once an animal of some kind, a small cat or a rat, ran along the ditch and over his legs. When at last he crawled out on to the field he knew what he was going to do. He had it all planned.

After eating a little of the bread and taking a drink from the flask, he crossed the fields and came out on to the road again.

It was a clear still night, although there were no stars showing at first. He walked with a fine swing and covered the ground. His feet made a loud hard noise on the road. It was good to be walking away from the camp. For the first time for months he breathed big and deeply. Once a bicycle passed him and in the dark a man's

voice called out, "Good night." Once a car went by him before he had time to get off the road. When he came to houses or to a village he went into the fields. This was more difficult; in the dark it was easy to miss the gates and to get too close to a house. Once a dog barked furiously at him, but it must have been chained up because it did not come after him as he ran away. It was not really dark, not pitch dark; even before the moon came up there was a greyness under the dark that showed the tops of the hedges and the line of the road. But it was dark enough; once he tripped and went over into some long grass and nettles, and once he came up hard against a fence. On the roads he went easily enough. He must have walked ten miles or so before he stopped for a rest.

It was ten o'clock by his watch. He sat down on the grass at the side of the road with his back against a bank and smoked a cigarette. From somewhere down the road came the sound of traffic. A main road was near, but where he was sitting all was quiet and peaceful. The stars were showing and they had a frosty look. It would be cold before morning, but now he was warm enough; he could have put his head back on the grass and gone to sleep. For the first time since he had been in this strange country he must have felt free to do anything he liked, easy and free and on his own. He would have been wiser to go on and put more miles between himself and the camp and then to find himself somewhere safe to hide before morning. This is what he had planned to do, but he shut his eyes and let his head touch the grass. Perhaps he dreamt that he was back in Wisconsin by the lake where Mike and he had the cabin that summer, and that there were pine needles under his head. It was the cigarette burning down in his fingers that made him sit up and open his eyes.

People were talking in low voices near him. There were footsteps coming down the road.

Perhaps he was still half asleep, but he put his hand in his pocket

and felt for the knife. Half asleep or not, even then it was in his mind. He pulled himself up and leaned against the bank and waited. The voices grew louder and he knew that it was no good because there were two of them.

There was nothing to be seen between the hedges but the two stopped in the road in front of him. It seemed that they must see him or know that he was there, but those two might have had the whole world to themselves. He sank down until they were against the stars but all he could see of them was one blurred shape. Then the woman said:

"No, no, it's too cold, George. It's fair freezing."

"Aw, come on, Bet," the man said. "I'll soon have you warm. Come on, now do."

"Leave off, George, can't you?" she said, but not moving an inch away. "It's too late," she said. "Must be near eleven."

"What of it?" he said. "Your Dad's on the night shift, isn't he? Come on, this is the place. The gate's over there."

"Not for me, George Waters," and she sounded almost as if she meant it. "Last time I got earth all over my coat and this is my best coat."

"Didn't I tell you there was a haystack there?" he said. "It will be as soft as lying in bed."

"There you go, George, what a thing to say to me," she said. "You keep a clean tongue in your head or I'll be straight off home."

"Oh, come on now. What are you playing me up for like this?" the man said. "What else are we doing out here this time of night?"

It was as good as a play. He must have wanted to laugh or clap them on, or to creep up behind them and give a loud whistle as he used to do to couples in the evenings at home with the other kids. Perhaps they made him feel that the world was going on all round him just the same as ever and that nothing was out of the way. He leant on the bank smiling at all that he could see of them until he

saw, with a shock, that he could see more than he had done before. The girl's face was a white blur and he could see the shape of her head and the man's shoulders. That was because the moon was rising. The sky was light behind them. In a moment the moon would show above the trees. He went down on all fours and crawled away from them with his head kept low in the shadow of the bank, and he was still laughing silently—although at any moment they might see him. The last he heard of them was the loud squeak of a gate being pushed open, and then he laughed again.

When he stood up and stepped back on to the road the moon had swung out above the trees. He kept in the shadows along the bank and looked at the moon and cursed it. "What do you want to stick your ugly face out for?" he said. "We were getting along fine without you." It was ugly, the ugly half of a waning moon, and it gave out too much light. "Now I'll have to go slow," he said to it, "and watch my step. Can't you find yourself a good thick bit of cloud?" But if he were careful the moon could help him. There would be no more falling into ditches. "Maybe it's lucky for me after all that you're up there," he said. "Maybe my luck knows what it's doing."

Staring at the moon he forgot the main road.

The hedge ended suddenly, and there, sitting in the middle of the crossroads, was a man on a motor-bike. His feet were on the ground and he was holding up one hand in a big white glove and beckoning with the other. The moonlight shone on his helmet and white arm band and caught the metal on the bike. Seeing the man sitting there alone in the night must have given Ross a shock. He threw himself flat in the shadow of the hedge and, as he cautiously lifted his head again, the first truck of the convoy rolled up and passed. The trucks rolled on like a river, half a length behind the other with their canvasses up and their lights dimmed: twenty, forty, fifty; then the

M.P. straddled his bike again and went off with one huge wave of his hand. But the trucks still came on. Ross lay in the grass and watched. It was lucky that George and the girl had enough to keep them busy for some time: they could have caught him then.

At last the road was empty. He crept out and looked up and down and behind him. There was something coming from the left, but it was a good way off. The road looked as broad as a lake in the moonlight; there were trees on the other side and thick shadows. He flashed across it and his luck still held. He was lying on his face under the line of trees before the next truck went past.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was only half past eleven. There was time enough for him to walk another ten miles before it was light, but he lay where he was for a while, listening to the traffic on the road. As he lay there, it occurred to him for the first time that he might not get away after all. He was shivering. The sight of that M.P. had given him a bad shock—the moonlight shining on the helmet had made it look like a skull. He pulled out his flask. After a drink he said, "Ross, remember your luck—it's done you well so far—you'll feel different when you get yourself some other clothes." He took another drink, and then he laughed a little to himself and said, "George now, I wonder how he's making out."

After a while he stood up and walked along by the road keeping in the trees. Then he turned into the fields again; it was slower but safer. He walked and walked, sometimes in the fields and then on the road, and back to the fields; sometimes he ran to keep warm. Every hour he stopped and had a cigarette. He was not tired. He could have gone on for ever, but the first excitement had gone. He was surprised when he looked up and saw that the sky was lighter over on his left. He walked on for another hour and when he stopped and looked round him the fields were grey. He could see the further hedges and, in front of him, just when he needed it, was a big close wood.

He spent all day in that wood. It was a long, cold day. First he went in under the trees for a couple of hundred yards and then sat down on a log and looked round. There was nothing to be seen except the bare trees and piles of dead leaves under them. Tree trunks stood up out of the reddish fallen leaves and behind them were other trunks and, behind those, tree trunks again—like a dream when everything goes on for ever, or like seeing in a looking-glass another looking-glass. Those tree trunks stood so thick and close that it was difficult to breathe. In summer when the leaves were out they would have hidden even the sky. But he was safe in the wood. After a time he went further in between the trunks and sat down with his back against a tree.

As he sat there with the light growing stronger round him, he found that he was hungry. When he took out the bread and the tin of soup he could not stop himself from eating even the last of the cold congealed mess in the tin. The food went to his head like drink. He wanted to sing and dance and shout. He got up from the log and went off into the wood, crashing through the bushes and kicking up the leaves as if the whole place belonged to him, going further and further in between the trees.

It was heavy going. There were no paths and the dead leaves lay in piles and drifts. It was like walking in water or through deep snow and soon he sobered. He came to a clear space between the tree trunks where the grass showed under the leaves, and the trees standing round were large and further apart. As he stood there, getting his breath, it began to rain.

The rain trickled down his back and under his collar. He stood there with his head bent, looking at the ground as if he had suddenly come to the end of all he knew, as if he were afraid to lift his head and see what was waiting for him. Then he turned quickly and plunged into the woods, away from the bare space and the open sky.

Ross walked into the dark prickly side of a big bush without

seeing it. The rain was coming down hard and the leaves scratched his face. He swore and hit out and took a step forward. Perhaps in all that wood there was only one clump of holly trees, only one that grew round a small dry hidden place, and he had had the luck to fall into it. That was what he did, tripped and fell. The branches gave way and there he was, sitting safe and dry and hidden by the dark-green shiny leaves.

The ground under him was beaten flat and most of the prickly dry leaves had been swept away. There was an oven in one corner made of a few stones put together. The first thing he did was to feel the stones, but they were cold. On one side there was a pile of dry leaves arranged like a bed. He sat there smiling to himself and listening to the rain coming down on the roof of leaves. The chances of anyone falling into that tramp's hiding-place were at least a million to one, that was his luck again, but it would not be lucky for the tramp if he came back that day. Ross lay there on the bed of leaves and smoked for a time and then he slept. He slept all morning; when he woke and looked at his watch it was past two.

He did not know where he was. What he saw round him was like nothing he knew, unless it was the wigwam he had built as a child, back in the woods at home. He looked up at the dark leaves. This was not the hut at the camp or the inside of a tent, or his own room high up in Chicago, or any of the other rooms he had known. It was not the cabin by the lake or the room he had shared with his brothers. He lay down again as if all he wanted was to turn over and curl up again and shut his eyes and stay there, hidden safely away for always. After a minute he sat up. Now he knew where he was. He was stiff and cold and thirsty. But even with his throat parched for water he did not want to leave that place. He sat there for a while longer. Did something tell him that he would never find a place like that again? Perhaps something told him, very clearly, almost as if someone had whispered it in his ear, that it

would be better for him if he lay down again and slept and never woke and let the leaves cover him for good.

At last he got slowly to his feet and looked for the way out between the branches, and when he had found it, he still did not want to go. He stood there shivering and looking out at the wood as if there were something waiting for him behind the trees.

Ross took out his knife and marked the trees as he went along, as if he hoped to find his way back to that place between the holly trees after he had found water. But he did not go back. For one thing he could not find any water. There were no streams or ponds or marshes in that wood. First he went where the ground sloped down but the trees grew thicker, and he turned round and went uphill again. He walked and walked, but always the trees were still there. There was nothing to see, not a living thing, not even a bird.

It was four by his watch, two hours after he had left the holly trees, before he suddenly found himself at the edge of the wood.

The trees stopped in a line at the top of a low cliff. There was a strip of grass, and then the ground went down, not bare rock but a slope covered with bushes and young trees, there must have been a landslide there years before, down a hundred feet or so to where the trees began again at the edge of a lake. The lake lay at his feet like an open eye staring up at him. The woods came down to it on three sides in a horseshoe shape and at the open end was a huge grey house.

The house was less than a quarter of a mile away. It was a bare barrack of a place with a row of pillars in front and a flat roof. There was no smoke coming from the chimneys, and even from where he stood the long windows looked as if all the blinds were pulled down. Behind the house the woods began again. It looked as if no one had ever lived there or, if they had, as if they had all died long ago. It was still afternoon on the top of the cliff where he was standing, but the house and the woods round it were dark, as if,

down there, it were already night. Ross looked down at the lake; his tongue and throat were bone dry by then. He whispered, "Here's Ross Dennehay's luck again—a stream or a puddle would have done as well, but of course it has to be a lake!" and he went straight down the slope, hanging on to bushes, slipping and sliding with earth and stones rolling under his feet. At the bottom was a line of trees standing with their roots in the water, a pebbly beach, and a boat lying on its side.

Ross did not look at the boat then. He went straight to the water. It was so cold that it made his teeth ache and it tasted of iron. When he had drunk enough, he filled his flask up to the top; that was spoiling two fingers of good brandy, but he did not mean to be caught without water again. Then he washed his face and neck and hands. The cold set them burning and tingling. It was only just over twenty-four hours since he had left the camp, but his chin rasped his fingers like a barbed-wire fence.

"Ross," he said. "This won't do. If anyone saw you they would run away screaming at the wild man of the woods."

He said this aloud and a bird flew up out of a bush and went off between the trees with a whirr. That made him jump and look round, but there was nothing moving along the horseshoe of trees or on the lake. Looking over his shoulder, he moved further away from the boat. A boat would not be lying there for nothing.

There was a little bay between two trees where he was hidden from everywhere except the lake. He crouched down on the shingle and took out his razor and soap and handkerchief. Although he could see only a blurred reflection of himself in the water, his jaw was soon clean and smooth, and he looked a different man. He finished off by combing his hair and dusting himself and giving his shoes a shine with his handkerchief. Then he lit a cigarette and sat down on a tree root and said, "What next?"

Behind the house the sky was turning a pink colour. From

where he sat he could see the sky and the woods and the house upside down in the lake, but clearer than the real thing. The house looked better like that; it looked a fine place, and he wondered who lived there and where they had all gone—he had not seen a living thing all day. He said softly, "Cheer up, Ross. If it all comes off as it should, maybe, in a few years time you'll be able to buy yourself a great house." And then, as he looked at the reflection in the lake, he said, "To hell with all that. Just let me get out of here."

The light was leaving the sky. He knew that he must be out of the woods before dark, but when he stood up he was so stiff that it was difficult to move and he asked himself if he had caught a chill, sitting there beside the water. There was a path going round the lake between the trees and he was standing there, trying to make up his mind which way to go, when he heard someone coming. The man was on him before he could do more than step out of the way.

It was dark under the trees, but there was light enough to show that the man was long and thin and that he wore khaki trousers and one of those high-necked sweaters and that he carried a stick. His shoes must have had rubber soles because he made hardly any sound on the path. He went straight past, walking with his head up, and then he stopped. He stopped dead and turned his head and came back along the path holding his stick in front of him.

He was young as Ross and looked ready for anything; there was no use trying to run so Ross stood where he was with his fists up. The man put his head further back and, looking straight over Ross's head, said, "There's someone here. Who is it?"

That must have been a shock. Ross could have touched him; he looked at the pale thin face and the thin curly hair and saw that the eyes were wide open.

The man said, "Is it Jeffries? If it is, you needn't hide from me. You are welcome to anything you can get out of my woods. I heard a pheasant about a hundred yards back." He turned his head

as if he were listening to something a long way off, and then he said, "No. It isn't Jeffries. He smokes a pipe—not Chesterfields."

Ross dropped the cigarette as if it had stung him and put his foot on it, and the man laughed. "Well, stranger," he said, "stay that way if you want to, but I think it's only fair to tell you that you'll have a job getting out of these woods before dark. This path goes half-way round the lake and then it's blocked at each end. That was done when the house was full of evacuees. This is the deep end of the lake—no chance of the children drowning themselves in the other. If you want to get on I suggest you come with me in the boat. Otherwise you are likely to be here all night."

He did not wait for an answer but turned back up the path again, walking slowly with his stick held out, and Ross followed him as if he were walking in a dream.

When the man stopped again there was a rope stretched across the path about three feet from the ground; he felt this with his stick and, as if it had told him something, turned left towards the lake. A shingle path went straight down to the boat; Ross, although he did not want to, followed him.

The boat was small and light; it lay on its side with its stern to the lake and a pair of sculls beside it. It did not seem possible that a blind man could row himself safely across the water and land on the other side where he meant to land; perhaps that was why Ross followed him; perhaps he wanted to see what he would do. The blind man pushed the boat off into the water and turned it round until it was floating against two stakes that stood up out of the water just off the shore. From the nearest tree a thin cable went out across the lake about six feet from the water and on the cable was a sliding ring through which a rope went down to another ring in the boat's nose. It was as simple as that. Fixing the oars he waved Ross to a seat in the stern, pushed off, and scrambled past him and sat down, and took up the oars as if he could see as well as anyone else.

When they were moving out on to the lake, he said. "Don't touch the tiller and sit still, that's a good chap" Then he jerked his head up towards the cable and said, "Another of my little devices. Neat, isn't it?"

They moved smoothly out on to the lake with the rope dangling in front of them. Ross sat opposite the blind man as if he had been ordered there, and stared into the thin face and into the eyes, which were a light blue colour. The boat must have shown up on that lake like a fly in a saucer of milk; anyone could have seen it from the house or the woods. Ross felt that he was doing a dangerous thing to be sitting there. He watched that house and the line of the woods like a hawk.

As if the blind man knew what Ross were thinking, he said, "The front of the house is shut up. I have lived in two rooms at the back ever since they let me out of hospital, alone except for my man Vincent. There will be no one about in the grounds. Everyone knows that I take myself across this sheet of ornamental water and back at the same time every day, and they are all too nice-minded and understanding to hang around and watch me do it. You wouldn't believe how understanding everyone is. I find your silence quite refreshing. You are taking advantage of a blind man, you know. Now, I wonder why?"

He stopped rowing and rested on his oars. The boat swung a little on the water until they were facing the woods. "Meeting you is quite an excitement for me," he said. "Won't you be a sport and tell me all about it? You can't think how tantalizing it is to have you sitting there opposite me, a complete stranger, someone who doesn't care a rap about me, and then not to see you or know a thing about you, except that you smoke American cigarettes, wear heavy shoes, weigh more than I do, and are delightfully mysterious." He laughed as if he could see the look on Ross's face. "That surprises you," he said. "You wouldn't believe how sharp we blind men get. Of course,

it isn't difficult to guess that you are hardly the usual type of visitor. But what are you, I wonder? Wouldn't it be safer to tell me? I might start imagining things. What about a spy, a secret agent, a fugitive from justice, a deserter, or even a common murderer, as they say? Am I getting warm? You see, I'm letting my imagination run away with me, as I said I would. Won't you tell me? Perhaps I could help you. No? Very well, have it your own way."

The boat swung back until it pointed at the house again and he put the oars into the water. It was then that Ross put his hand into his pocket and, taking out the knife, laid it on the seat beside him. The blind man must have guessed what he was doing because he suddenly leant forward until Ross could see his eyes shining. "I have had another idea," he said. "My mysterious but most welcome stranger, can it be that you are death?"

It was beginning to be dark on the lake. A mist was coming up from the water and it was very cold. Ross shivered and let the knife slide back into his pocket. He could not do it. All he wanted was to be out of that boat and away from the blind man. He opened his mouth, and shut it again. It would not have done for his voice to be heard. The man knew too much as it was.

He sat there, staring at Ross in an eager way, and then he said, "No? I'm disappointed in you," and sat up and bent to his oars so that the boat leapt towards the house. The cable ended in a clump of trees at the edge of the water and there was no one waiting on the shore for them.

When the boat was lying with its bows against another couple of stakes, Ross saw that there was a string going from the stakes in the direction of the house, about four feet from the ground. The blind man found this, and, with his hand on it, turned his head.

"Give me my stick, that's a good chap," he said. "I have left it in the boat."

Ross knew that he was being given another chance; it was dark

under the trees and the lake was near. He hesitated. Perhaps he told himself that the khaki trousers and sweater would not be much use to him. He picked up the stick and put it into the outstretched hand.

"No?" the man said again. "Well, I could give you a meal and a drink you know and set you on your way. I have lots of things I should like to show you, some more devices like this string. It goes all over the house. I can tell by the knots in it exactly where I am. The only trouble is that Vincent is always falling over it." He laughed, and then said in another voice, "There's always an easier way, you know, if only you can see it in time. You would be safe with me. Fellow feeling and all that. I don't owe the world anything."

When there was no answer he took something out of his pocket and laid it on the ground between them.

"Well, it's been a pleasure," he said. "Here's a couple of quid. May help a bit. If you go to the right and then straight on, you will find the drive and that will bring you out on the road. Good luck. So long." And when he had gone a little way off he stopped, and lifted his hand in farewell.

Ross watched the tall figure walk away over the grass until he could not see it in the darkness. Then he picked up the money. He did not want it but he took it—no one could have left it there.

The drive was a long narrow road as black as a tunnel under fir trees. He went down it as if something were chasing him. Perhaps he thought of that empty barn of a house full of shut-up rooms and of the knotted piece of string going up and down the stairs and along the passages. He was trembling by the time he reached a pair of great carved gates set across the road.

The gates were locked. He seized the iron scrolls in both hands and shook them, looking over his shoulder as if he expected to see the blind man running on his rubber-soled shoes down the drive. But it was no use shaking the gates; they could have kept out an army. He was in a sweat of fear by the time he found a way over

the wall and he did not look before he jumped down into the road, almost on top of a car that was parked there.

Ross saw the rear light burning as he landed in the mud at the side of the road. He staggered up and put his hand on the cold shiny back of the car and leant there, getting his breath. He could not have moved then if his life had depended on it. Then a torch shone in his eyes and a voice said:

"Thank heaven for small mercies! I had begun to think that everyone in these parts had bloody well died. Here you, soldier, be a pal and give me a hand with this bloody wheel."

The voice was loud and thick. Ross did not like it then or at any other time. The man was standing between the car and the wall and the torch turned from Ross' face on to the ground, showing a pair of polished brown shoes and the edge of a check overcoat.

"Come on, soldier," said the voice again. "I have been stuck here for hours. I have jacked her up all right, but I can't get these bloody screws to budge."

As Ross went nearer he looked at the car. It was empty and it looked fast—a Buick.

The left front wheel was flat with the inner tube bulging out. Tools were lying about. The torch was now on the ground so that what light it gave shone straight at the wheel. In the light a pair of hands were straining at the screws with a wheel-brace. The hands were large and red and on one was a thick gold ring.

Ross said, "Here, let me have a go," and crouched down beside the wheel. "Guess I'll have the bitch off in no time."

The man put the brace into his hand at once, leaving a whiff of his breath on the air. He was not drunk but he wanted to talk. He leant against the mud-guard and, after giving Ross a cigarette from a big, shining silver case, he talked as if he would never stop.

By the time the wheel was off and on to the grass at the edge of the road, Ross knew more than a little about him: that he was

touring round on some government job, inspecting factories, that he was a stranger in that part of the country and that he usually worked in the North where he had left a girl who seemed to be on his mind.

Ross learned quite a bit about this girl although the man grew a little mixed comparing her good points with those of other girls he had known. It was plain that he was not a married man and would take good care he never was. He made it plain that he did not think too unkindly of himself. Ross did not hurry over that wheel. He let the talk go on. It all fitted in. His luck was in again.

As Ross said this to himself the man broke off and said, "I'll tell you something, old boy. This is my lucky day."

He would not have said that if he had known what was going on in the dark head beside him. Ross smiled as he listened to the thick voice.

"Amazing luck, old boy, having you come along," it said. "If anyone had told me that I would ever fall upon the neck of a bloody Yank, I would have called him a bloody liar. But am I glad to see you? Forty minutes I have been straining my guts out over those screws. You must have wrists like iron, but there's something wrong with that brace all the same, although I won't say I haven't been knocking them back a bit. I have had a lucky day—been celebrating—it's a poor heart that never rejoices, and what's the harm? Know the Three Red Hearts, pub back there in Beaminster? The barmaid there is a nifty bit of goods—but that's not what I want to tell you—where was I? My lucky day, that's it. Luck: there's a bitch for you, a lovely unaccountable bitch, haven't you found that out for yourself? But listen to B. Williams' words of wisdom and remember, never give her up, never despair, because you can never tell which way she's leaning—just when you think it's no go and never will be, she opens up and there you have her. What was I saying? Luck? Well, take this evening—just when I had kissed my hand good-bye to her, along come our Allies, bless 'em, and everything in the garden's lovely again."

"See here," he said, bending down so that Ross had another taste of his breath, "now that you have got that wheel off, what about a little drink? Have I got a flask? Trust old B. Williams for that. Never caught without the needful, war or no war. Come on, don't be afraid of it. It's Scotch all right."

The flask must have held a quart. As he drank, Ross knew what was the matter with him and why he felt as if B. Williams and his talk were happening in a dream. He was hungry. He had not eaten all day. He picked up the torch and shone it through the window of the car. On the back seat was a pile of rugs and a big suitcase, but nothing to eat.

"What are you looking for, old boy?" said B. Williams, coming up behind him. "The spare wheel is at the back."

Ross saw that he did not know all about B. Williams yet. The man was not too drunk to be suspicious and he did not want to have a scene with him then. Anyone might have come along and found them there with one wheel on and the other off. He said, "I'm looking for something to wipe my hands on, don't want to muck up your paint." And then he said, because he could not help it, "Suppose you haven't got anything there I could eat? I'm hungry, and that Scotch was good and fierce."

B. Williams laughed and said. "All you Yanks have got heads like blocks of teak, and as a rule you take good care to get your rations in time. What have you been up to?"

Ross told him a tale while he took the spare wheel off. Perhaps he thought of George because it was all about a date he had made with a girl. He told him that the girl had not turned up and that he had hung about for a long time and then tried to take a short cut back to his camp through the grounds of some great house. The story was convincing, and B. Williams was soon telling a tall story about a blonde of his own. Ross pretended to listen while he got the wheel on as quickly as he could and, for that matter, it was

worth listening to; he found himself getting excited about some girl he had never seen.

At last the wheel was on and Ross stood up, wiping his hands, while the man bundled the tools on to the floor boards at the back. Then he did just what Ross had counted on his doing. He said, "Like a lift anywhere? Better still, what about you and me getting together? I owe you more than one drink. Let's make a night of it. I tell you what, let's go on until we come to a decent pub. Hop right in."

He held the door open and Ross was into that car and pulling a rug up over his knees before he could change his mind. B. Williams got into the seat behind the wheel, but instead of driving on he turned round and switched the light on in the roof.

"To hell with the black-out," he said. "We're all right here under these trees as long as a nousey village policeman doesn't come along. Just remembered, I have some sandwiches left over from my lunch—there in the back under the rugs. Dig them out and have another drink."

He held out the flask again and, as Ross took it, he saw that the man was taking a good look at him. He was glad then that he had shaved and tidied himself. He stared back. B. Williams must have liked what he saw better than Ross did.

He was a big fleshy man, older than he had first seemed, with a red face and a big yellow moustache. There was a scarf round his neck. The shoulders of his coat were well padded. In his hat was a coloured feather. He smelt of drink and good clothes and cigars. The brim of his hat put a shadow across the top half of his face, but Ross could see the small sharp eyes watching him. When he smiled, which he did suddenly, his teeth showed square and strong-looking and a little yellow. He looked a hard man and pleased with himself.

"What's your name?" he said. "As I think I have said before, mine's Basil Williams."

Ross gave him his real name. It did not matter now.

"Ross Dennehay," he said, "Irish, eh? Well, never mind. I'll forgive you that, seeing that you can't help it." He looked away then as if he had made up his mind about Ross and took a drink from the flask, tilting back his head until the folds of flesh under his chin showed. Then he put the flask into the door pocket and took out a pair of yellow driving gloves. Ross had made up his mind too, and he never took his eyes off the man. Did he see him in a way he had never seen anyone else before—seeing him a little bigger than he really was, seeing him tenderly and carefully, as if, by making up his mind, he had put a mark on him, set him separate from everyone else, like a farmer marking the steer he had chosen for the market or the way the farmer's wife looks at the turkey she is fattening for Christmas? But the man could not have seen anything in Ross's face. He was quite sure of himself when he put his hand on the light switch again. As the light went out he said: "Why sit there at the back? Come on in front by me. I always like to talk to someone when I'm driving—that's why I always pick up anyone I can. If there's no one else I talk to myself."

He had a loud laugh, loud and sudden, like a horse's neigh. He laughed too often. Ross laughed loudly with him and slid out of the back of the car and into the front seat. He was in a fever for the car to start; it was asking too much to wait there any longer, something was bound to come down that road, but B. Williams took a long time, fiddling with the gear lever and putting on his yellow gloves. As the engine started up a lorry came down the road and past them. The sweat burst out on Ross' face although the light was off and no one could have seen anything except a car moving out from the side of the road. Perhaps it seemed to him that the special mark, the difference, must be on the car for everyone to see.

B. Williams was laughing happily as he put the car into gear and let in the clutch. The Buick moved off and Ross leaned back and let

out the breath he had been holding in. They had started. All was ready. Now it was up to him.

The road was narrow and rough. B. Williams was a good driver, but the Buick went down that road far too fast considering that they could only see a few yards in front. He was singing after that last drink from the flask, but when they came round a corner on to a big main road, he stopped and changed down and slid across as smoothly as Ross would have done himself.

Ross sat back and watched the road flipping past. His legs were warm under the rug; the engine kept up a soothing hum; everything was going the way it should; he couldn't have asked for anything better. When B. Williams leant over to him and said, "Tell you what, old boy, let's get on to Exeter. Sure to be a hotel there where we can feed. It's only forty miles on. Don't you worry, I'll get you back to your camp before morning. Come on, be a sport, let's make a night of it," Ross nodded. He nodded and grinned into the red face, and all the time he must have known that he would have to do what he had to do before they reached Exeter. He looked at the speedometer and at his watch, and knew that he had about another hour—plenty of time.

It was then that his head began to nod. He jerked himself awake. It was his luck again that B. Williams stopped singing and shouted in his ear: "Heard the one about the tart and the bomb disposal squad, old boy? Stop me if you have."

The way he told it would have kept anyone awake. No one could have stopped him. Each story he told was dirtier than the last. They roared with laughter while the Buick swung along. It was as well that there was little traffic about; the Buick missed a truck coming towards them by inches. Ross should have known that he needn't worry. Nothing could have hit them then. His luck would not let a thing like that happen after bringing him all that way. There they sat, side by side, rushing through the night and

B. Williams had no idea what was going on in the head so near his own. That made Ross laugh louder than ever; they were sitting so close together, the knife in his pocket was so near the fat side, it did not seem possible that he did not know. But he went on with his stories and laughed at them enough for two and never noticed when, after a while, Ross stopped laughing.

As he sat there did he feel that he was back in a dream again? That none of this was happening to him? The Buick and the road and the night, and the shape of B. Williams beside him could easily have been a part of a dream in which he had nothing to do except sit back and let it happen as it must happen, a dream that had begun when he met the blind man. They had met, come together, and after that meeting everything had swung up to another level, after that there was no drawing back; he was a signpost pointing the way down a narrow road, or a hand coming out to send the ball rolling where it could not stop. From that dark house beside the lake a thread went back to the M.P. with the moonlight shining on his helmet, to George and his girl, to the farmer walking in his fields, to the teashop in a mean grey street. Did he think of them all one after the other, as he sat there with his eye on the dashboard of the Buick? Each one springing up to push him a little further down the road he wanted to go, each one leading one from the other until, here, at the end, was B. Williams.

Ross turned his head. There was B. Williams, as large as life, leaning over the wheel with his hat tilted over one eye and a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth and the words streaming out from behind it. There he was, but he was not going to be there much longer.

The watch and the speedometer showed Ross that time was getting on. He looked out of the window beside him; they seemed to be going through a tunnel of dark trees.

'Come on,' Ross whispered to himself, putting his hand into his

pocket. 'One good jab into the neck, there, just below the ear, that will do it.'

Before he had finished saying it he must have known that it was not going to be as easy as all that. It must have been like waking out of a dream. Until then he had been going along, letting things happen to him, but from that moment it was different, he had woken up. He saw what he had to do. He took his hand out of his pocket and it was slippery with sweat. Perhaps he saw a picture of everything that could happen, everything he had not thought of before—the Buick going into the hedge, turning over, the crash, two men fighting together and blood running over him. His knees trembled and he shut his eyes. The sweat ran down his chest.

The Buick slowed down, stopped. He opened his eyes and there they were, drawn up at the side of the road. B. Williams turned to him and said, "Nearly there, old boy. Be in a built-up area soon. Must be all that whisky but I want to pee. Better do it while I can. Never let a good chance go, as the old lady said to the bus conductor. Won't be a jiffy."

He climbed out and slammed the door. Ross knew he had not gone far, but it was far enough.

For a moment he could not move. Then he pulled himself together. He knew exactly how he was going to do it.

He reached over the seat and felt about on the floor at the back until he found a spanner, and then made sure that the knife was loose in his pocket. That was all he needed and he sat still and waited.

When B. Williams came back after a moment or two, he was whistling happily to himself. Ross heard him coming and was ready. B. Williams did what he could be counted on to do—he opened the door and put his head and shoulders in first.

He never knew what hit him. He fell forward over the wheel. Ross took the knife out and felt for the head and found it and turned it so that he could feel the throat. The man was not dead.

The voice stopped abruptly in the room. For a moment there was silence. The wind tore at the windows, a coal dropped in the grate. It was the same room. Nothing had changed.

But the room was changing. In a moment nothing would ever be the same again.

Edwina lifted her head and looked across the hearthrug. "Oh, no," she whispered. "No. No more."

The whisper ran from floor to ceiling, but of course a whisper was no use—one might as well try to stop a river with a thread. Moving stiffly, because she had been sitting still for a long time, she lowered herself from her chair and knelt on the hearthrug.

"No," she said in a loud voice. "That's enough. There is no need for any more. Don't say anything more. There is no need for another word."

She put her cold hand on his shoulder, but he shook it off.

"Be quiet. You don't know what you are talking about," he said. "I'm trying to show you."

He stopped speaking and looked past her head into the room. His eyes were narrowed as if they were looking into a light. They were black, glassy, completely opaque, and gave back a distorted reflection of the room. The whites, she saw, were shot with blood.

"Listen," she said, "I know. I was there with you. Killing is easy. All you have to do is to lift your hand. Nothing is easier and once it is done nothing is ever the same again and it is difficult to stop. War—that is different. It should be the same, but it is not. And perhaps doing it in anger is different too—hitting out, shooting, throwing a knife, all without thinking or planning—it should be the same, but it is not the same, is it? No, it is the deciding that does it. The finding the throat, the feeling for the place; it is the lifting the knife and saying, 'I do this because I need to, want to, have to.' It is the saying, 'This is alive, let it be dead.' And when it is done

there is no coming back. You see, I know. I have been there with you. Please, please let it go at that. No more."

"Get up on your chair again," he said. "It isn't finished. You are going to hear the end of it. It won't do to leave anything out, then I'll be able to sleep. You must see it all."

"I had thought of everything," he said. "The rug took care of what blood there was and the scarf kept it off the clothes. When I was sure he was dead, I bundled the body in the rugs and pushed it over the seat into the back."

"It couldn't have been more than five minutes before I was in the driving seat and turning the Buick on the road."

"It was done. There was nothing for it but to go on. The most difficult part was in front of me, if I had only known it."

"But I didn't know. When I put my hands on the steering wheel and felt the accelerator under my foot, I felt good, good and happy and without a care in the world. That's how I felt at first."

Edwina listened. 'I see,' she thought, 'I see you sitting in the Buick, tearing back through the night the way you had come. The wind strains the hair back from your head. I see your white face behind the windscreen.'

The Buick went back until Ross found a side turning. This was a narrow road where two carts could not have passed each other, but it took him to the very place he wanted, as he might have known by then it would do. First it crossed a stream where there was only a plank footbridge and the water spread out into a shallow pool; it was only a few inches deep, but he could hear water falling somewhere close and knew that there must be another pool below the level of the road, which would be useful to him soon. The road went up a hill and came out on to open land. When he put his head out of the window he could see some trees against the sky and some tall bushes. This was the place he needed for what he still had to do,

and he stopped the Buick and then ran her in between the bushes, bumping and scraping on the rough ground, until it was well away from the road.

What he did next took a long time to do. It took hours, or that is what it seemed to him. He had to use the torch from time to time to make sure that there was no blood except on the rugs. The worst part was getting the clothes off—no one would believe how heavy a dead arm can be, or how difficult it is to get a dead leg to go the way you want it. Ross grew angry half-way through; he said aloud, "B. Williams, you fat slob, what's the use of holding out on me? You might as well come out of that singlet gracefully as not." And then he laughed, and looked over his shoulder fearfully, as if he had been making too much noise.

Ross had one bad moment when he was standing there over the body and heard a car coming up the hill. He threw himself flat on the ground and the car went straight on, crawling in second gear over the hill. He had another and worse moment when he took the last of his own clothes off and felt the cold air sting his back. There they were, two naked men together, and he wanted to laugh again but he shivered instead; he shivered until he could hardly get himself into B. Williams' clothes. They were a bad fit on him; he had to take a pleat in the trousers and let down the braces and the coat was too loose. The shoes were the right size, and that was the main thing. The scarf, of course, was no use, but he found another in the suitcase. There was blood inside the crown of the hat but he rubbed it carefully with a bunch of grass. Ross even remembered to take B. Williams' watch, a gold one, and to leave his own with him. It was only right to put clothes on that nakedness as quickly as he could, so he left the pockets until later.

Dressing B. Williams was not difficult. He seemed as if he were glad to be covered and made decent again, even if it were in a G.I.'s uniform. Ross had to leave the top buttons of the trousers undone

and he wasted time trying to get them to fasten. He put the cap on the dead head and his wallet and identity disc and everything of his except the knife and cigarettes into the pockets. Then he wrapped the body up, like a parcel in the rugs, using the string. This, of course, was what the ball of string was for. Had he known it back there in the shop? Why did he buy it otherwise?

B. Williams had plenty of money on him. The notes were in a case with his identity card and ration book, papers, and a snapshot of a girl in a bathing suit. Besides the case, there was a bunch of keys, and, of course, the silver cigarette case. The driving licence, petrol coupons and maps were in the pocket of the Buick. Everything was ready, but Ross stood there a while longer, as if he were trying to think of anything he could have missed.

He stood looking down at the long shape done up in the rugs, seeing it there at his feet in the dark that was not even then all dark, because it was outside under the sky, although the stars were not showing and it was not yet time for the moon to rise. He lifted his head and looked round at the black trees and at the sky, and whispered, "All this trouble. All this sweat and hurry—why?" And then he said loudly, into the dark, "For the clothes, of course. I had to have the clothes."

He knew where he was and what he had to do next. He stepped across the body and went up to the Buick with the torch in his hand. The floor boards at the back were stained in one place where the head must have lain. He scrubbed this over and then found the spanner and wiped it and put it back in the tool box. It was while he was moving the suitcase that he found the packet of sandwiches.

The smell of the bread and meat was strong and rank. He had not eaten all day, but it was no use—the first bite came straight back, and left him retching and gasping. He wrapped the packet carefully up again. It would keep until he had finished what he had to do.

It was hard work getting the body on to the back seat, but he did it at last. He listened for a long time to make sure the way was clear before he started the engine up and backed the car out on to the road.

Trees grew thickly over the stream at the bottom of the hill; here it was dark, as dark as the grave, but this was another bit of luck for him because he had to use the torch. He stopped the Buick in the middle of the stream and stepped out of it on to the plank bridge. On the other side of the bridge was a drop of a few feet into a pool. He collected some stones from the banks of the stream, and in the dark this took time. He was in a sweat again before he had fixed them under the rugs. The body seemed to grow heavier every moment as he dragged it out of the car and on to the bridge, and he had to stop and listen every few seconds in case someone should come down the road. He could not tell how deep the pool was. He had to take a chance when he tipped the body over; it went in with a splash that sounded loud enough to wake the dead. He waited a little and then shone the torch down. The water covered everything. There was nothing showing in the pool.

The Buick tore up the hill with the engine roaring too fast in bottom gear and the cart ruts crumbling under the wheels. Ross slowed down when he turned on to the main road and his hands were steady again on the wheel. The Buick passed the place where it had happened but he did not turn his head. Then he was driving between rows of houses into a town.

In the narrow streets it was darker than it had been on the open road. The Buick passed over a long narrow bridge and went up a hill where the houses were close, and then he was lost, if anyone can be lost who never knew the way. It seemed to him that he spent hours in that town, and that the houses crowded together and the streets twisted and turned on purpose to keep him there as long as they could. Again and again, the Buick crossed the same square, a

square with a statue or a fountain in the middle, or if it were not the same square it was one just the same. He might have been driving in a dream. He could not see what he was doing or where he was going, and he brought the Buick to the side of the road and stopped the engine.

There were still a few people about on the pavements. There was no reason why he should not stop someone and ask the way out of the town. All he had to do was to lean out of the window and call, "Hey, wait a moment," but he could not do it. He sat there sweating and shaking and looking through the glass in the window at the people going up and down. He could see the ends of their cigarettes and he could hear the sound of their voices and wheels going by on the road, but they were miles away from him, in another world. He tried to help himself by saying out aloud, "Come on, Ross. It's as easy as pie. Roll the window down. Put your head out and say, 'Hey, just a moment.' It's only the first word will be difficult. I promise you your voice won't sound any different." It was no use. He was afraid. He could not do it. He sat there with the sweat running down his face until a hand tapped the window, the car door opened, and a voice said, "Can't park here. Name and address, please."

That was when Ross had reason to be afraid, but he was so relieved to have someone speak to him that nothing else mattered. He must have felt as one does when a real live hand shakes one out of a bad dream. He smiled as he handed B. Williams' papers over, and his voice sounded amused and confident as he said, "Have a heart, officer. I'm a stranger here. I have been driving round this town of yours for hours trying to find the way out. Now I'm lost. Be a sport and put me right. I want to get home sometime to-night."

A torch shone into the car and over Ross. Behind the light was something dark filling the car door, a white slab of face peering in, and a big white glove holding the papers. Ross sat there, smiling a little and waiting for what was going to happen.

At last, after he had stared at the papers for what seemed like a night and a day, the policeman grunted and handed them back. And then, before Ross could do anything about it, if there had been anything to do, he eased himself in through the door and into the front seat. From the way he did it, and from his loud breathing, he must have been a heavy man; the springs of the seat groaned as he sat down and stretched out his legs.

"Where are you making for? Liskeard?" he said.

Ross could have blessed him. "That's right," he said. "Liskeard it is. Should have been there hours ago, but I had a puncture way back."

"I'm going off my beat and I'll set you on your way," the policeman said, leaning back and making the springs talk again. "Seeing as how this black-out's fair confusing if you don't know the town." Then he gave a fat wheezing laugh and said, "Don't you be thanking me. I live out on the Liskeard road. It'll be killing two birds with one stone, as you might say."

It was all Ross could do to thank him and get the wallet back into his pocket and the Buick moving. He was shaking again and cursing to himself. The policeman rolled the window down and said, "Straight on here. First to your left, mind the kerb," in his slow, soft, comfortable voice. Perhaps it was only part of the dream. Ross looked at him out of the corner of his eye but all he could see was a big dark shape and some buttons gleaming. "Here we are, sharp left now," the policeman said. "Keep straight on until I tell you." He was there, with this big solid British policeman sitting beside him with his hands spread out on his knees and breathing through his nose. Ross laughed silently. He said, under his breath, 'Officer, take a peep over the back of the seat. A body lay there not so long ago, yes, a nice new corpse, just waiting for someone to come along and find it. And here, beside you, officer, is the man who did it.'

"Turn right," said the policeman, leaning forward. "Go slow—steep hill down here."

Ross said, "Have a smoke, Officer?" and brought out the silver case. In a moment he might have told one of B. Williams' stories, he might have done anything, but the man said, "Here we are. I live down that street. Now you keep on this road until the bridge and then turn left. Moon will be up soon, and then you'll make better time. You'll have to hurry if you want to find any one up in Liskeard, it's getting fair late. Staying with friends?"

He stood in the road with his hand on the Buick's door. The door was shut between them, and now it was all Ross could do to answer him. He knew that it would not do to look impatient, but it was difficult to sit there, with his hand steady on the gear lever, saying "good night" and waiting for the hand to leave the door. When at last the policeman stood back, the Buick seemed to go of itself up the street.

When Ross was on the open road again and there were no more houses, he drove as if all hell were after him. There was nothing on the road and he had the night to himself.

He drove all night. The moon came up, showing the road going away from him. The country went by without his noticing it, although it was there to be seen, a little misty and vague but clear enough, if he had taken the time to look at it. There was no time; no time to make sure that he was on the right road, no time to eat, or to take a drink from the flask, no time to take his foot off the accelerator or to stretch his arms. Twice he found himself falling asleep over the wheel and jerked himself awake just in time.

"Faster. Faster," said Edwina. He was safe only as long as he kept moving. Something was building up behind him and he must keep moving while the petrol in the Buick's tank lasted. He was half asleep, and now they were coming after him—everyone he had met since he had left the camp. In some way they had got together,

compared notes and agreed—all of them, from the girl in the teashop, through the blind man and B. Williams done up like a parcel in the rugs, to the policeman with his pencil and notebook. They had formed themselves into one dark menacing shape and were coming up behind him like a storm. He was safe only as long as he kept moving.

“Be quiet,” said Ross. “It isn’t finished yet.”

Hours later the road went over a river and up a long hill. The heat from the engine was rising up round his knees as the Buick climbed. Up, up it went through a huddle of dark houses and out on to a flat high bare country. He saw the country then; it was laid out round him like a map in the moonlight; the road drew out across it, slanting down a little, and the Buick followed it like a bird. He looked at his watch in the light from the dashboard; it was three in the morning and at the same time he saw that the gauge showed little or no petrol in the tank.

He slowed down and stopped the Buick at the side of the road. It was all he could do to get out and have a look round. It was an exposed place to stop in, but he could not have driven another mile. On the left, when he stood looking down the road with his back to the moon, the land sloped down and to the right it went up, misty in the moonlight, but with a rock showing here and there, to a bony, odd-shaped hill. There was a rough track going from the road across the open ground towards this hill. Ross started the car up again and drove her in along the track for a few yards and switched the engine off. It was all he could do. His eyes were closing. He climbed on to the back seat and put his head down on the suitcase, and slept.

He slept. How could he sleep? But he slept, and when he woke and sat up, knocking his head against the car window, it was light.

The sun was not yet up, but it was going to be a fine day. There was no wind and the sky was clear. When he got out of the Buick

and walked up and down to get the stiffness out of his legs, he could see across the bare grey country for miles. On one side was the stony flat-topped hill and on the other the ground went down in folds and ridges away from the road. He saw stone walls and, far away, the roofs of some farm buildings, and, further still, a straight grey shining line. He stared at it for some time before he knew that he was looking at the sea.

He shouted for joy. Perhaps when he saw the sea he saw himself stepping off the gangway of the ship with the sea safely behind him. He said aloud, "Ross, you have done it. There's the sea. Next stop, America!" He stood there, breathing deeply, and looking at the sea.

The day was growing brighter every minute and the sun would soon be up. It was half-past six by his watch. It was time to get rid of the Buick. It would not do to keep it any longer, even if he could have found the nerve to use B. Williams' petrol coupons. He stared at the country round. There was nothing moving on the road or anywhere else but it looked as if it were impossible to hide as much as a pin in it, let alone a big blue car.

Between the road and the rocky hill was a clump of dark trees almost hidden between the sides of a shallow valley. The track went from the road in that direction. He made up his mind to take the Buick there.

The track came to an end twenty yards or so short of the trees, but that did not stop Ross. Two springs and a tyre went, but that would not matter to the Buick now. It charged a narrow ditch as if it were a tank; the bonnet was forced through a bunch of gorse-bushes, and there was the car, in between the trees. It was done just in time. As Ross switched off he heard a lorry go past on the road below.

There was no need to hurry now. The chances were against anyone coming up that track or across the open country to the trees, even if they were the only trees for miles. The trees were a

clump of firs growing, for no reason at all except to be another piece of luck for him, between the road and the hill. But it was better for him to hurry and be done with it. It was wiser to keep moving.

The screws of the number-plates were stiff but he got them off at last. He took the licence off too. Then he went through the pockets on the doors and the boot of the car. B. Williams' flask and maps, together with the driving licence and papers, went into the suitcase. There was nothing else except the tools and he did what he could with these to get rid of the engine number. Now, all he needed was time, only a few days. The Buick would sit a long time under the fir trees before anyone found it; there was no reason why it should not sit there for years. It might have been wiser to set fire to it, but that would only have brought a crowd round, if there were enough people in those parts to make a crowd. He picked up the suitcase and the number-plates and walked out of the opposite side of the trees, the side facing the hill.

The hill looked a safe place. He could lie up there between the rocks and see all over the country. It looked no distance at all from the trees, but it took him nearly two hours to reach it. It was hard work carrying the case as the sun got higher. Anything moving on those bare slopes could be seen miles away. Once three planes went over, flying high, but he lay still on the ground until they had gone. The sun was hot although the grass was stiff with frost in the patches of shade under the rocks and crackled under foot. He had one bit of luck. He nearly walked into a bog, he did not know what told him that the bright patch of green was dangerous. He threw a stone in and it sank at once. That was the place for the number-plates and the maps, all except the one he meant to keep. He flung them in and watched them disappear. He had put another barrier between himself and B. Williams.

The bog made him go a long way round, but he walked as if he

were feeling lighthearted again. The sun was shining on his back, and somewhere, high up where he could not see it, a bird was singing as if there were nothing to worry about in the world. He climbed over a stone wall and went up the last slope of the hill as if he, too, were using wings.

The summit of the hill was a pile of rocks. Ross threw himself flat on a great grey jutting rock and looked down. He could see the coast running both ways along the edge of the sea for miles and miles. To the left far below him was the clump of trees, and further still the road going back the way he had come. The whole country was spread out round him; it seemed that if he turned his head he would see back to that stream with the plank bridge and the pool, back to the house by the lake and the wood, back to the camp. But he did not turn round. He took the map out of the suitcase and, with the coast lying below him like another map, soon made out where he was.

Below, not more than a mile away, were some houses and the lip of a green valley. Away to the right, between the hill and the sea, was a big town. That was what he needed—a town big enough to have a railway station; from there he could reach a port and the sea.

He took the packet of sandwiches from his pocket and laid it down on the rock. It was while he was lifting the flask to his mouth that he saw the soldiers.

There must have been twenty soldiers spread out and moving round the hill as if they were looking for someone. Ross threw himself down and the bread and whisky came into his mouth in a bitter-tasting mess. He lay there cursing his luck and swearing and shivering. It never crossed his mind that they were not looking for him. They could have had him there on the hill like a pack of dogs round a treed cat. If that had been the end he would not have had a long run considering all the trouble he had taken.

When he lifted his head and saw the line of khaki dots disappearing over a fold of the ground he could not believe it. He crept round the rocks, looking down on all sides to make sure that it was not some kind of a trap and that no one had been left behind to watch the hill.

Even when it seemed certain that the soldiers had gone, he kept low between the rocks and only looked out from time to time. He lay on that rock for hours. He had made up his mind that he must stay where he was all day and then try to get down to the road before it was quite dark. After that he would have to trust to luck again.

Finding a hidden place between the rocks, he made himself as comfortable as he could. Then he put his head down on his arms and went to sleep.

Ross slept on and off all day. It was cold. He was hungry, but he could not eat the sandwiches and left them for the birds. The rocks leant over him and he could see the sky; every few hours he opened his eyes and looked at it to see how the day was getting on.

The sky was covered by a dark cloud when he woke up for the last time. He looked at his watch and climbed on to the rocks. He was stiff and cold.

Evening had come. Down below the land was hidden by a thin mist. He could see the rough shape of the ground and the line of the coast, but all the details had gone and everything was the same purple-grey colour; the rest of the colour had gone into the sky. From the hill it was like looking down from an aeroplane; there was the same cut-off feeling and his head began to swim. He felt that it would save a great deal of effort and trouble if he could drop by parachute out there on the other side of the houses. It looked a hard stony place to land in; it would be easier to go up, up into the sky, like a bird. The clouds moving sent the hill swinging under him. He could have floated off it as easily as a bird.

Now that the time had come he did not want to go. He stood on the rocks listening to the sounds coming up on the cold air. He could hear a dog barking and someone changing gears on the road below, but there was nothing to be seen except the purple mist and the sea. The sun was down behind the clouds and soon it would be dark. It was time for him to start but he did not want to move. It all seemed too much trouble.

There was a path going down the hill and at first walking was easy. The path led to a cart track. It was getting dark by then, and it seemed as if he would never find the road. The track went up a hill and then came to an end. Ross had to open a gate and then another. It was almost dark and the ground was very rough. It began to rain and the wind got up. It blew from the sea straight into his face—with the rain and the wind he could not see anything. He was on the rough open ground in long grass. It took him a long time to find the track again.

The wind grew stronger. Soon it was all he could do to make any way at all. He nearly threw the suitcase down a hundred times, but he knew he had to have it. He went on, cursing the dark, afraid to use the torch in that open country, cursing the wind. He must have crossed the main road without knowing it. He had lost the track and was stumbling along between rocks and bushes. He had no idea where he was and he could see nothing except darkness, and, when he stood still and listened, he could hear nothing except the sea.

The wind and the rain were too much for him. He began to run in circles. He ran into bushes and into rocks. He ran and called out, and sobbed, like a child, and ran again until he fell. One moment he was running through grass that came up to his knees and the next he was lying on the ground with a pain like a fire running from his foot to his armpit.

Ross sat up, holding his ankle, and heard the sea close below

him; the waves pounded on the cliffs and now he knew that there was nothing between him and the drop to the sea. When he tried to crawl away from the sound, he did not know which way to go—the sea sounded on all sides at once. When he stood up he could not hear it any more. There was nothing to be heard except the wind. He stumbled along the cliffs with the dark pressing on his face and the wind pulling and pushing.

That was the end. One moment there was nothing but black emptiness. Then the dark and the pain did not matter any more. He was coming out of a bad dream. He was coming home. He knew the way. He knew the way to go. And there was the side of the house, and the steps, and the door.

Edwina sighed and stirred and looked round the room. The room was cold and still. The last live coal had fallen from the grate long ago; there was nothing there except a heap of grey burnt-out ash. She thought, 'How ugly the room is. How dark.'

The lamp was going out. As she looked at it the flame gave a last flicker and sank. Now the room was given over to darkness. But it was not dark; an uneasy cold grey light was coming in under the edges of the curtains, spreading out into the room, pushing the shadows back.

She got up and crossed the room to the windows. She was stiff from sitting crouched on the chair through the long hours, and it was difficult to move. But it was more than stiffness; she was heavy, heavy with a new cold weight that she had not known before. 'I shall never be rid of this weight,' she thought. 'It will be with me always, weighing me down, until the day I come to die.' Taking the curtains in both hands she flung them back, sending the curtain rings clashing together. The pale dawn light pressed close against the windows. Without turning her head she said aloud:

"Morning has come."

When she looked round she saw that he was asleep. His head was turned to her and she could see his face. The cheek rested on one hand, easily, comfortably. His face was composed, peaceful, smoothed of fear and anxiety, surrendered wholly to sleep. He looked younger than she had ever seen him look before. As she stared at him she thought, 'A child would fall suddenly to sleep like that after getting rid of the meal that had disagreed with its stomach. Yes, that is what confession is—a getting rid of, a cleansing.' As she turned back to the window she thought bitterly, 'Why should he sleep while I stand here? Why should he get rid of this load on to me? What have I done?'

The cold light was spreading over the fields. Now she could see the edge of the cliffs and the darker line of the sea. As she watched, a stone wall took on shape. She could see the rocks in the field and the shapes of the gorse bushes blowing in the wind.

She thought, 'In a little while I shall be able to move. Already I have accepted what he has told me. I shall never be myself again. Now I know it all, nothing is hidden, and we shall go on from here.'

Leaning her forehead against the cold glass of the window she thought, 'In a moment, not for a few moments, but in a little while, I shall go to him and touch him and take his hand. I shall talk quietly to him. I shall lead him to his bed and let him sleep. I shall do anything he asks of me. Then I shall turn to the house. The day will go on. Other days will come.'

PART
FOUR

THE HOUSE WAS WRAPPED IN MIST. FOR THE PAST WEEK, FOR seven days and nights, the wind had blown and rain had lashed the windows, but this morning the wind had gone, and in its place the cold, still mist crept in from the sea, piled up against the cliffs and flowed slowly over the fields. The house was lost. A grey curtain had been pulled down over it. It was surrounded, cut off, set apart, all on its own—its own shut-in private world.

When Edwina opened her bedroom door and came out on to the landing in her old blue dressing-gown, she noticed at once the new quiet in the house. The rattling and straining at the windows, all the resistance of the last days had gone. The silence was complete; it lay heavily on landing and stairs like a pall. 'How different the landing looks,' she thought. 'It looks closer, smaller, as if the walls had drawn in on themselves. Even the light is different. There are no shadows, no colours; everything is subdued and grey and a little blurred.' The landing window, like the windows in her bedroom, was an opaque white square. 'I like it better without the view over the fields,' she thought. 'I like the mist. It gives the house a safe, shut-in feeling.'

The stairs were dark and cold and smelled faintly of the sea. As she had often done this past week, she had overslept and was late for her early morning tea, but she did not hurry on her way to the kitchen. She stood at the head of the stairs listening to the silence in the house and breathing in the damp salt air. Somehow the mist had found a way into the house. Not a great deal of mist, a breath, a suspicion, but it was there. When she touched the banisters they

were damp and small round drops hung from the window-ledge. She frowned and went cautiously down the stairs. The hall was as cold and still as a pool; stepping down into it was like stepping off a shore into deep water and the sea smell was stronger here. The sitting-room door was open, and, looking in, she saw that the mirror above the bookcase was grey and cloudy and that the polished table looked as if someone had breathed on it.

'A window must be open somewhere,' she said to herself. 'The walls are certainly whole and impervious, and I locked the doors myself last night when I went to bed. Ross has opened a window, although he knows what trouble I take to keep the house safe for him. Now, which window, I wonder?'

As if a sudden thought had struck her she hurried across the hall into the kitchen. The back door was half open. "He has been down to let the dog out," she said. "I asked him not to, it is not safe. It is dangerous—there might be someone waiting for him outside the back door. But he doesn't care. He is getting bored and restless. Because his ankle is a little better he thinks that he can do anything. A week ago he couldn't use it at all."

She shut the door and turned back to the kitchen. The kettle was already on the Aga and the steam from its spout was making the kitchen's own private mist. Her face softened. She smiled as she thought, 'He must have put the kettle on to save me trouble before he went back to bed. And it was thoughtful of him to let the dog out instead of calling to me to do it. I expect James worried to go out early. That dog is odd these days, quite unlike himself. Why does he sleep with Ross instead of on my bed or in his basket? You might think he was bewitched.'

She lifted the kettle. It was nearly empty. 'I might have known it,' she thought. 'He only wanted some shaving water. He wasn't thinking of me at all. Now I see where he spilt some water on the floor when he filled the jug. I ought to have seen before that the

trail goes across the tiles to the door. He isn't as steady on his feet as he thinks he is.'

As she fetched a cloth from the scullery and dried the tiles, she thought, 'He would have done better to stay in bed and let me bring him his hot water with his tea as I usually do. He can't do without me yet.'

The kitchen was full of mist and steam. The grey light showed her that the room was dull, unkempt, and not very clean. The used plates and cups from last night's meal were still on the table, the curtains hung limply across the window, the tiles were unshining, and, now that she looked at it for the first time for days, she saw that the top of the Aga was covered with grease and stains. 'This is all wrong,' she thought. 'What have I been doing?' But, as she began to carry the dirty plates into the scullery, she thought, 'What does it matter? I have other things to think of.'

Leaving the table as it was, she set out cups and saucers on a tray and filled the teapot and covered it with a dishcloth because she could not find the tea-cosy. 'I must really tidy up this place,' she thought. 'I will do it after breakfast, or perhaps to-morrow. I haven't the time now. I mustn't keep him waiting any longer for his tea,' but instead of picking up the tray, she went to the back door and opened it.

Mist poured past her into the house as she stood on the step. "How cold and soft and clean it is," she whispered. "If I took a few steps away from the door I believe that I should be lost."

She held her hands out as if she were walking in her sleep and took a few steps away from the door. Her hands, from the wrists, seemed to vanish into the mist. She thought, 'I like the mist. It hides everything so easily and kindly. I should like to walk away into it, to disappear and leave everything and never be seen again. He would have to work it all out for himself then—I should have escaped.'

She looked over her shoulder and saw that the house had dis-

appeared. There was nothing to be seen except herself, the square of earth under her feet, and the shining, clinging, soft wetness which was neither rain nor cloud, nor air. 'Yes,' she thought. 'A few steps further and I would be gone for good, just as I am in my dressing-gown and slippers.' She laughed and the sound was thrown back to her instantly from the grey curtains. 'Was that really my laugh?' she asked herself. 'What an ugly sound. No wonder the mist would have none of it.' As she tucked her hands into the bosom of her dressing-gown to keep them warm, she thought, 'No. I am not going to get out of it as easily as that.'

She turned round on the path, but now she did not know where the house was. For all she could tell it might have taken the chance while her back was turned to slink off to another field or even to disappear into the earth. In a panic she ran forward and, as she stumbled over the doorstep, the dog shot past her into the house. She slammed the door behind them and bolted it. "Why, I'm trembling," she said, leaning against the door and looking at the kitchen as if she were surprised to see it unchanged. "And look, my slippers are soaked through."

The kitchen was still misty, but there were the four firm walls and the plates shining on the dresser. In a little while the heat from the Aga would banish the last damp greyness and the room would be its own comfortable self again. 'After breakfast I will really see to you,' she promised. 'I will make you as neat and well-groomed as you ever were.' "And as for you," she said to the dog, "before you go upstairs, come here and let me dry you. Just look at the marks your paws are leaving on my tiles. Stand still, while I fetch your towel."

But the dog would not let her touch him. He danced round the table, always keeping out of reach of the towel. Every one of his black hairs held a shining point of water and the tassels of his ears were hung with burrs. His eyes shone with a red gleam. He growled

in his throat and tossed his ears at her. "What has got into you?" she asked him, and he stood still for a moment looking up into her face. She could see that his body was quivering with excitement—or was it a kind of unholy joy, a knowingness, as if he were laughing at her from his sleeve?

"James," she said beseechingly. "James, you haven't been near me for days. Are you his dog or mine? You are making a grave mistake—he doesn't care about you. Can't you see that he is only making a fuss of you because he knows it annoys me? Can't you see that he is amusing himself watching us both. Come here, come closer. Aren't you afraid of him, just a little afraid? I think that you are, whatever you may say."

The dog stood still and, as she rubbed his back and chest gently with the towel, she cried to him silently, 'My love, whatever happens we must keep the secret between us. No one must so much as breathe on it. He has no idea what we sometimes are to each other and he must never guess. Promise me to be careful.' The dog gave her a sharp look and, slipping away from the towel, made for the door.

"The door is shut," she said aloud. "Come back and I will give you some milk. He will only throw you out if you rush into his room all soaking wet—much better let me dry you properly." But she might as well have spoken to a dog she did not know, a dog belonging to a stranger. He threw himself into his wild dance again, leaping up before the door and barking piercingly.

"You are not even a dog this morning," she said to him angrily. "Not even a plain ordinary animal. I don't like the look in your eyes at all. You ought to be riding through the skies on the back of a broomstick." She opened the door and he rushed across the hall and up the stairs without giving her another glance.

"Oh, well, let him go," she said sadly, as she picked up the tray and followed the dog upstairs.

Ross was not in bed as she expected but standing in his pyjamas in front of the window. Behind him the room had the dishevelled look that any room he occupied for more than a few hours soon took on. She had noticed this before, but now she thought that this bedroom looked almost as if a whirlwind had been through it: the curtains hung crookedly, and even the furniture, Madge's heavy cupboard, the chest-of-drawers that had belonged to her father, seemed to stand out from the walls at strange angles: the bedclothes were on the floor, a shoe lay on the dressing-table and the empty suitcase, for no reason that she could imagine, was propped up in the armchair like a visitor. 'He does nothing you can put your finger on,' she thought, 'but even if he lies in bed all day with his eyes shut, the room assumes this disorder about him.' She sighed and put the tray down on the table and said, "You will catch cold standing there in front of the window."

He did not answer except by a shrug of the shoulders. She could see by the way he held his head that he was in one of his black moods, but as she knelt down to light the stove she heard herself saying, "What have you been doing to James? I can't get any sense out of him this morning. I wish you would leave him alone."

The dog looked up suspiciously at the sound of his name and then lay down again, keeping himself still, but watching every movement she made. She could see his eyes shining uneasily from the shadow behind the stove.

"He is a strange dark little dog," she said, "and he has always been difficult, but since you came he has been impossible. I'm losing him altogether. You are taking him away from me."

"Don't be silly," he said coldly. "What should I want with him? You get on and light that stove."

He left the window and limped across the room. The striped pyjamas hung loosely on his hard body. The trousers were too short and showed his ankles and the straight hairy shins. She wanted to

smile at the way the coat flapped behind him like a sail, but as he moved restlessly between the window and the stove she saw that to smile would not be wise. There was something in the way he went backwards and forwards across the narrow room that made her think, 'He is in his tiger mood. I wish I hadn't mentioned the dog—it was stupid of me—it was dangerous.'

"Shall I pour out your tea?" she said nervously, but he took no notice. "You and that dog," he said. "The way you go on about him makes me sick. It's unnatural. It isn't decent. Anyone would think he was a child."

Although she had half expected them, the words were like a blow. She felt sick and she was afraid that she was going to cry, but she forced herself to keep her face blank and unconcerned. If she showed any sign of feeling, the merest flicker, he would, she knew, be in full cry on the scent of her secret, never to leave it until he had brought it out and torn it to pieces. She scrambled to her feet, and picking up his dressing-gown, held it out to him. "Put this on, please, Ross," she said, "you are shivering. You don't want to be laid up here for another week, do you?"

She saw that she had led him away from the scent with much the same awkward flappings and circlings that a mother bird uses to draw danger away from her nest, but he had been too close. As she sank down again by the stove, striking the matches on the box without seeing them, she told herself, 'I mustn't mind what he said. I must forget it. He knows nothing. It was only a lucky hit in the dark.' She did not look at the dog. For a moment she wondered if she would ever be able to look at him again except with the sort of glance that might pass between a pair of exposed and shameful lovers. Then she told herself firmly, 'Don't be foolish. Nothing has happened. Everything between me and James is as it has always been and our secret is not a shameful one—it is only silly and perhaps a little sad.'

The stove was giving out a comfortable smell of hot iron. A fan of colour lay on the white rug. As the heat crept up from her cold knees to her face, she began to feel easier. He had stopped his restless pacing up and down and was standing at the window again, fastening the cord of his dressing-gown round his waist.

"Look at it out there," he said. "Here's a nice cheerful sort of morning. What a country—it lets up raining and blowing for a moment and hands out this!"

"It is only mist," she said.

"Only mist! It's a fog, that's what it is," he said. "It's thicker than I have ever seen it before. It gets me down. I hate it. It is like being wrapped up in wet cotton wool."

"I like it," she said, holding her hands out to the stove. "It makes everything seem safe and shut in and private. Now nothing out there has anything to do with us. Don't you feel that the house is rather like a shell to-day? With that grey wetness round us we might be at the bottom of the sea. Anyway, no one can get at us to-day. We are quite safe as long as we don't poke our heads out and ask for trouble."

"Sounds sort of shut in to me," he said. "Your shell wouldn't suit me for long. I would soon feel that I couldn't breathe."

She saw him put his hands up to his throat and pull the lapels of the dressing-gown wide apart. Then he turned away from the window and threw himself on the bed.

"It's different for you," he said in a muffled voice. "Maybe you are not so much interested in what's going on outside. You are used to messing round with the little inside things, but I want to be up and doing all the time. I like to be going somewhere and to feel that there's nothing to stop me any way I want to go."

After a few moments he sat up and pulled the bedclothes over his knees. As he poured out the tea he said, "I'll be nuts soon if I don't get out of this house."

She did not answer. Although she kept her head bent and did not look at him, she knew that he was sitting with his hands round his knees and his head sunk in the collar of the red dressing-gown. She thought, 'I have only to lift my eyes and see your black head to forgive you anything. How strange and cruel it is that a mere arrangement of flesh and bone and hair should have such power. He can do anything and he knows it. Ever since that night when he made plain what I had already half guessed I have had no defence. What I accepted then has made me a part of him. I am his accomplice, his accessory, his other half, his self. Now here I sit at his feet, and I am so much a part of him that I don't care that he sees me in my faded dressing-gown. I don't care what part of me is exposed to him or that my face is shining from the heat of the stove, my hair hanging on my shoulders, or that my slippers are worn down at the heels. In this one week we have come to know each other so well that we are like two people who have lived together for many years. There is no need to keep up any defences. There is nothing we don't know about each other. We know each other to the bone.'

As she thought this she felt a warm tide flowing through her body. She half shut her eyes until she could see only a line of rosy light showing between her eyelids. 'I don't regret anything,' she thought. 'This oneness of two, this opposite of loneliness, is all that matters. For this, there is nothing I wouldn't do.'

But when she sighed and opened her eyes and looked across the room at him, she saw that she had been wrong. She did not know him at all. A stranger, wrapped in the folds of the red dressing-gown, sat on the bed. The cavernous cheeks under the high bones were altogether strange to her as were the lines on each side of the mouth and the hard jutting chin. As she stared at him he moved his head sharply and there again was the look of youth and the sheen on the thick hair. She was not deceived: 'I have been wrong,'

she thought. 'We are strangers to each other.' And she thought with despair, 'I can't even see him clearly. I am sure of nothing about him. One moment he seems huge and dark on the bed and then very small and thin and hard. Is he there at all or does he only exist in my mind?'

She pushed her hair back from her forehead roughly and cried, "Don't sit there without saying a word. What are you thinking about?"

He answered at once: "I'm thinking how the hell I can get out of here."

His voice reassured her; it was the familiar thick drawl that she knew as she knew her own hand. She said calmly, "You have been thinking that all this week. But neither of us has been able to see a way out yet, not a way that would give you a chance."

"I'll have to go sooner or later," he said. "I can't sit here for keeps. I believe I would do best to walk out of the house and take a chance on my luck again. It has done me pretty well so far."

"Then let me come with you," she cried. "I could help. I have money. Two of us together would manage better."

"You?" he said. "Not a hope—you would give it all away before we had gone a mile. You can't hide anything. Everything shows on your face. I have only to look at you to know what you are thinking. All along that has made it too easy for me. That's how I have had you where I wanted you from the word go. No, what you have got isn't in your head. Out of this house you would be no use to me."

Suddenly he smiled down at her. She knew that the brilliant flashing smile was a part of his equipment and that he flashed it on and off as easily as he put on his smooth mask, but the smile, as she knew he meant it to do, took the sting out of his words and left her helpless. Her heart stopped, faulted for a second, and then beat so furiously that the blood rushed to her head. 'Oh, why can't you be

content to stay here with me?' she cried to him silently. 'Can't you see that all we need is here? This one room is enough for us. This is the whole world.'

She hid her face in her hands and, although she knew that she should have said, "Don't waste your smile on me. Keep it for the next silly woman you come across," she heard herself saying in a voice she did not recognize. "Don't go yet. Stay with me a little longer. I will do anything, everything. Surely there are worse things than staying here? Haven't you been comfortable? Food is a bit short, not what you have been used to, but I will get some more. Only let me go out, to the village or down to the Cove, and I will manage somehow. You can't leave me after all I have done for you. You can't. Anyway, your ankle isn't strong enough yet. You can't go. I won't let you go."

Through her tears she saw him lift his hand with the impatient angry movement she had come to know as well as she knew his smile. "Jesus!" he said. "Stop it. Stop that crying—I can't stand it. Isn't this day miserable enough without you making it worse? Do you want me to get up and walk out of the house this minute? Now see here, I'm not saying you haven't done me fine, but you could have got rid of me if you had really wanted—you know that and you know we are quits. Get that into your head and we'll go on from there. Come on now, be yourself. Come here."

Moving heavily and awkwardly she got up from her place by the stove. Under his look she felt enormous. Never before had she felt so clumsy and ungainly. All she wanted was to get herself out of the room. But as she made for the door, he put his hand out and caught hold of the skirt of her dressing-gown.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "You are not going until you take that look off your face. I'm not going to be shut up all day in this house with a look like that. Come on, give me your hand. Now smile. There, that suits you better. You are the kind for smiles, the

nice, soft, easy kind. Now you go and put on that red dress of yours, it's a cheerful kind of colour and I'm sick and tired of seeing you slopping about in that old skirt and blouse. And get a move on. I want my breakfast. Here, before you go, let's hear you laugh, I'll know then that we are friends again. Come on, laugh. I know you want to—you are the easy, laughing sort. That's how I like them. That's you."

As she stood beside the bed looking down at him and trying to pull her hand from his she found, with a rising sense of fear and horror, that she could not stop herself from laughing. The smile that had come obediently to her face, the foolish slavish smile, trembled and changed into a laugh.

"That's it," he said. "I like to see you laughing. It's not the silly sort of neigh that most women have. You put your head back and bring it out of that chest of yours as if you meant it. Don't you worry. I'm not clearing out yet. I know as well as anyone when I'm on to a good thing."

The laugh that was rising in her throat again changed to a sob. She pulled her hand out of his and ran to the door. He called out after her, but she took no notice. All she wanted was to hide her ashamed face in her own room.

II

It was cold in her bedroom after the warmth of the other room. The room had an austere chill air; she noticed this at once when she opened the door. As she crossed the floor to the dressing-table she felt very strongly that the room did not approve of her any longer, that it had made up its mind, quietly but definitely, to withdraw from any complicity in the situation. When she looked from the stiff folds of the flowered curtains and the exact square of the carpet to the blank whitewashed ceiling, she could almost hear

the drawing back of invisible skirts. "I like that!" she said indignantly. "How can you be such a hypocrite after all the encouragement you gave me in the beginning, after all the ideas you put into my head. You are a nice one to try and appear suddenly so straight-laced."

All the same, she felt her face flushing again and it was an effort to lift her head and meet her own eyes in the looking-glass. But the eyes were the same as they had always been—large, blue, vague, a little unhappy. 'If this is a new Edwina,' she thought, 'a brand new, thoroughly changed Edwina, no one would guess it. She looks the same—a big pale untidy woman.' She leaned forward and examined her reflection more carefully. 'No,' she thought, 'when I look at her closely I see that she is not the same. I see that the mouth is fuller and looser, the hair unbrushed, the eyes strained and a little bloodshot, and that the figure, even under the double folds of the dressing-gown, has a new slackness and fullness. Yes, there is a blowiness about this Edwina, a full blown over-ripe look which she didn't have before. Somehow she doesn't look quite clean.'

She drew back from the glass and put her hands over her eyes. "What have I done?" she said aloud. "What has possessed me?" And now she looked at the quiet cold room, at its blue and white colours, at the lines of its plain furniture, as if she were waking out of a dream. "Yes, this is all a dream," she said to the room. "It hasn't happened to me." For a moment, while she stood still in front of the mirror, she felt that this was true. She felt light, free, empty. Then the room's silence fell on her again like a heavy hand.

She leant forward until she was almost touching the reflection in the glass. "This is not a dream," she whispered. "These incredible far-fetched, melodramatic happenings are happening to me. I have let them happen to me."

Holding her hands tightly together as if she were in physical pain, she began to walk distractedly up and down the room. The

mist leant hard against the windows as if it meant, sooner or later, to have its way and to penetrate the last recesses of the house. "Why can't the house and I be let alone?" she asked. "Why must we be subjected to this ceaseless pressure? We were quite happy in our own way."

'The house and I were one,' she thought, 'indivisible, as the snail and its shell are, but this shell lay waiting at the edge of the sea with nothing in it but air and a little sea-water——' "It is too late now," she said aloud. "The damage has been done and the space is filled once and for all. It is too late to draw back now."

As she pulled off her dressing-gown and threw it on the bed and picked up her underclothes, she said to the room, "I will not stand those virtuous looks from you. The fault was largely yours. It all began that first evening when I opened the hat-box here on your carpet. You gave me every encouragement then. Yes, that was the beginning, that was when the first crack appeared in the shell. Don't you put on airs with me. I will soon take that smug look off your face."

Still half dressed and shivering with cold in her thin petticoat, she ran to the hat-box and, throwing up the lid, turned the contents out on to the floor. It did not take her long to find what she wanted. the Spanish shawl with the sprawling flowers to go over the white counterpane, the purple chiffon scarf to drape the dressing-table mirror, and the big artificial rose which, as a last gesture, she pinned on the curtains. "There," she said, standing back to look at the effect on the room, "that's more like it. Shrug that off if you can!"

The red dress was waiting on its hanger in the cupboard. As she pulled it over her head, she thought, 'Now I really must hurry and get the breakfast, but afterwards I will unpack the box properly and put all these clothes out on the shelves in the cupboard. Why should I be ashamed of them now? Poor dears, they might as well come out and feel themselves at home.'

She finished dressing as quickly as she could, fastening the buttons of the dress, brushing her hair and pinning it up before the mirror. As she powdered her nose, she saw that her face wore a new expression. The mouth was set determinedly; there was a bright flush on the cheeks and the eyes were defiant. 'I look my best this morning,' she told herself. 'And I might as well wear the red-feathered slippers instead of my shoes, they would be more in keeping.'

At the door she took a last look at the room. In the cold early morning light the colours of the shawl on the white bed were like smears of paint on a surprised face. The rose on the curtains had a rakish and rather pathetic air. She frowned and turned her back on it and shut the door. As she met the calm look of the landing she felt ashamed again.

'What have I been making all this fuss about?' she asked herself, standing at the top of the stairs with her hand on the banisters. 'What a noise I have been making.'

She put her hand to her head. "What have I been doing back there in the room?" she said aloud. "What have I been imagining? Everything that has happened has followed on, one thing from another; it couldn't have happened any other way. Now, here is the house, safe and whole and filled, no empty space left. And here is another day. I will think no further than this one day."

The high heels of her slippers made a new sharp light sound as she hurried down the stairs. 'I like this sound,' she thought. 'It sounds somehow gay and different. It doesn't sound like me at all.'

III

The kitchen was, as usual, its own place. It was a complete world needing no other atmosphere than its own. Here it was impossible to think of anything except the necessity of getting breakfast ready

in time. Edwina smiled as her hands moved busily over the table. She thought, 'A kitchen is certainly a soothing place, and to-day, with the mist hiding the fields, it seems safer and cosier than ever. Here my only fears are of burning the toast or putting the cloth crookedly on the table. "Everything in its own time and in its own place and not too much or too little of anything," says the kitchen, and, while I am in the kitchen, I quite agree.'

She was waiting for the sound of his stick on the stone floor of the hall, but the door opened without warning and he came in followed by the dog.

"You are managing without your stick," she cried. "Why, isn't that splendid? But are you sure it is a good idea? I mean, why not take the weight off it while you can? I will run upstairs and get your stick for you."

"You stay where you are," he said. "I'll tell you soon enough when I want you running up and down stairs for me. My ankle is cured, finished with. You can keep your hands off it from now on. You are not going to put your nurse act over on me again."

"You are still limping," she said. "It must be painful still, but, just as you like. Let it be nothing to do with me if that is how you feel. My father used to say, 'A man is as well as he thinks he is, or if he isn't let him think it.' He was a doctor, you know."

"How should I know?" he said. "Let's see what you have got there for breakfast."

"We will have to think what we are going to do about food," she said, as she put the dish on the table and took off her overall. "Tomorrow, whatever the weather, I will have to go up to the Farm and ask Mrs. Penny if she can possibly let me have a chicken or a rabbit. It's not much use going to the village—I used up all my points last time. It is really very worrying. I don't know how we are going to manage."

"Well, don't let's think about it now," he said. "Let's get on with what we have got."

"You are quite right," she said, sitting down opposite him and picking up the teapot. "The table is not the place for serious discussion,' that is another thing my father used to say."

"You seem to have your father on your mind this morning," he said. "How's that? You never so much as mentioned him before."

"My father was everything to me," she said, and found that she could not say any more.

From the day that he was buried, she had been unable to remember what her father looked like. She could recall every note and inflection of his voice, the words he had used, the things he had done, but, however hard she tried, she could not see him again. This had made her very unhappy. She had felt that it was in some way disloyal of her. That she would never see him again and never make sure which of his eyes had yellow flecks in it and which of his eyebrows was higher than the other had tormented her for years. Then why should he now appear to her in the kitchen? Why should she see him now when her mind was full of someone else? But see him she did—only for a moment—but so vividly, with such detail, that he might have left her only yesterday. She did not see him in the surgery or in the garden of their old home. He was standing in a blaze of sunshine on a paved terrace with his hand resting on a marble plinth. The brilliant light showed every detail of his brown, heavily-veined hand, the black alpaca coat, the panama hat, and the trousers that were baggy at the knees. The brown eyes in the shadow of the shaggy brows were looking up at her and the full lips under the grey moustache were moving. What was he trying to say to her? What was it he had appeared to tell her? Was it a warning? A farewell?

"See here—what's up now. What have I said?"

She looked quickly across the table. The black eyes in their deep

hollows were examining her face. She was not ashamed of the tears in her eyes, but she knew that she could not talk about her father to him.

"What's up?" he said again, but she only shook her head and filled the cup he held out to her.

Now he was looking at her suspiciously and to distract him she said, "I was only thinking about the past, when I was a child. Suppose you tell me something about yourself. I mean about your home, where you came from. When two people have got to know each other well, they always want to know what went before—all the details, back to childhood, back to the beginning. At least, that is what a woman always wants to know. Only a short while ago I was thinking that I knew nothing about you. I should like to know—to be able to give you some roots. They would hold you down and make you seem more real to me. Perhaps, then, I wouldn't feel that this week has been a dream."

"Is that how you feel?" he said. "Maybe it's just as well."

"But I don't want it to feel like a dream," she said. "I want to feel it all, every bit of it with every part of me. At first I was afraid, but now I see that however dark and strange it is, I have got to take it all in. Don't you see that is our only hope? That is what is meant to happen."

"You talk too much," he said. "Now see, here. I'm not standing for this sort of talk while I'm eating my breakfast."

"Breakfast is supposed to be eaten in silence, I know," she said, "but we can hardly call this meal we are eating breakfast. Do you know it is getting on for eleven? What we are having now must do for our lunch as well."

She put her cup down, and resting her chin on her hands said in a dreamy voice, "Don't you like to look back to the time when you were a child. Everyone does now and then, even if that time wasn't a happy one. It is a rest from the present, a rest for the mind."

It is like stopping work in the middle of the morning and taking time off to smell a bowl of flowers, or to sit back and twiddle the thumbs, or to draw lines on a piece of paper, or to pick your nose, or to watch someone across the street in another room. I like to talk about my childhood. Madge says I return to the past to evade the present, and that it is bad for me. But it is not as simple as that. Don't you feel that if only you could go far enough back and start again from there everything would work out differently?"

"The things you say," he said. "No, I never think about when I was a kid."

"I can just imagine you as a dark, greedy, little boy, running in and out of your mother's kitchen, getting in the way and asking for titbits."

He pushed his chair back from the table and said, "That's enough. Don't you start imagining things. The less you know about me the better. What's all this got to do with us now?"

As she stared at him he said more quietly, "Come on, give me another cup of tea."

She took the cup he pushed across the table to her and picked up the teapot. "There is no more milk," she said. "We have finished all that was left from yesterday. I suppose we can't expect John Penny to come on a day like this. The can wasn't there when I opened the back door."

"Are you sure?" he said. "When you are in one of your talking spells there's no knowing what you will see or not see. I'm going to look for myself."

"No, let me go," she said, starting up from her chair. "Don't open the door. Even on a day like this you never know."

She reached the scullery as he opened the door. "Take a look at that," he said. "You must have been dreaming again this morning."

The mist was still as thick as it had been, but the can shone up at them from the middle of the top step. Beside it was a dead rabbit,

two loaves of bread, and two letters, neatly arranged with the letters lying face upwards on top of the bread.

"There was nothing on the step at half-past nine this morning," she said. "I stood here, on the steps, and whistled for the dog. Don't you see what this means? Someone must have left these things while we were upstairs or while we were sitting eating breakfast."

"Not while we were in the kitchen," he said. "We would have heard them even if they hadn't knocked."

"If they had crept up to the house quietly we wouldn't have heard anything," she said uneasily, looking into the mist. "They couldn't have got in because the door was locked while we were upstairs, but how horrible—we thought we were so safe and cut off by the mist and private, and all the time someone was at our door without our knowing it. Come in quickly and shut the door. It isn't safe to stand there. How do you know they aren't waiting out there in the mist?"

"Now don't start panicking," he said. "Get these things inside. We would hear someone coming down the path in plenty of time."

"Not if they didn't mean us to hear them," she said as she bent down and picked up the letters. "Don't you see that the mist, which we thought was so safe and friendly, makes a fine cover for anyone approaching the house? We could be surrounded without knowing it. We would never know if anyone was coming until they were here."

"Stop talking and get inside and let me shut the door," he said. "If there is anyone out there they must be hearing every word we say."

In the kitchen they stood looking across the table at each other. His face had the haggard look she had seen in the garage. The sallow skin was stretched tightly across the cheekbones and the eyes had sunk deeper into their sockets. 'What shall we do?' she thought. 'The house is no protection and when danger really comes what use am I to him? Then she saw the dog sitting in front of the Aga and

she cried, "How stupid we are being. James would let us know soon enough if anyone was coming. He often barks at nothing, but he never fails to bark if something is there."

"But someone came and he didn't bark," he said.

"Don't you see that proves whoever it was came when all three of us were in the bedroom. You couldn't expect him to hear anything through two closed doors, but from now on he shall stay downstairs where he can give us plenty of warning. It is all right. Don't look like that. Sit down and let me give you another cup of tea."

"Better read your letters," he said. "They may be important. They are the first you have had since I have been in the house."

"One is from Madge. I shan't worry about that now," she said. "But the other is a note from the Farm. Whatever can they want?"

"Read it," he said. "Quickly—let's know the worst."

"There is something written on the envelope—that is Mrs. Penny's writing," she said. "Listen to this. 'Hope as how you are not ill, Miss Marsh, not having seen you about for days. Am sending bread with the milk and a rabbit in case you are running short by Johnny would come myself but hands full as Tom away also a note what Mrs. Buse asked me to give you yesterday when in the village. Yours, Mabel Penny.'"

She looked up at him and knew that the colour had left her face and that her hands were trembling. "Mrs. Buse?" she said. "Why should Mrs. Buse write to me? You open it—I can't."

He took the envelope from her and slit it open, using the dirty knife on his plate. She saw that his face, too, was pale, although she did not remember ever having mentioned Mrs. Buse to him.

"I'll read it out," he said.

"'Dear Miss Marsh. Flora and I aim to pay you a visit to-morrow round about three o'clock as you so kindly asked us that day in the shop and to-morrow suiting it being Saturday. Please not to put

yourself out and the walk will do us no harm if this is not convenient to you. We both are real keen to see the house especially Flora. I did see it once when Mr. Stanton was alive, but expect it is now not the same. Yours truly, Ethel Buse.' ”

“Who are these people?” he said, throwing the letter on to the table. “What have you been doing?”

She sat down on her chair and rested her shaking hands on her lap. She did not dare to look at him, and all she could find to say was, “Then it was Johnny who came. Poor little thing, what a shame to send him out on a day like this.”

She might have known that would make matters worse. He said furiously, “Why waste time worrying about that half-witted kid? What about us? To-day is Saturday. These people are coming and now I’ll have to clear out at once. What made you ask them here. Or have you been trying to be clever? That’s it, you are trying something on.”

“No, no—it was the only thing to do,” she said. “I asked them that day I went down to the village. Don’t look at me like that. I knew what I was doing.”

“You bitch,” he said. “I might have known it.”

She looked quickly up at his face and then away again. ‘This is the face that poor girl saw at the end,’ she thought. ‘And the man too—this was the face waiting for him in the car although he did not see it.’

Violence was trembling in the air. She could feel it with the nerves of her skin. ‘But this time I can’t resist it,’ she thought. ‘I am tired out, sick and tired of it all. I will sit here and wait and let it happen. Perhaps this is what was meant to happen.’

Through the window she saw that the mist was no longer stationary about the house. It was flowing slowly and steadily inland. She could see lighter spaces in the greyness. In the silence that had fallen on the kitchen she could hear the clock ticking on the dresser like the even beating of a heart. ‘How hushed and peaceful every-

thing seems,' she thought. I feel extraordinarily languid. I couldn't lift my hand if I tried. Have I died here in my chair without knowing it? Surely there must have been some unpleasant preliminaries, but I don't remember anything happening? Has nothing happened after all? Then why am I sitting here?"

Making a great effort she turned her head and looked at him. He was sitting in the chair by the table with his head bent and his hands folded loosely in front of him. The drooping shoulders and even the slackly-curved fingers looked defeated. The eyes he lifted to her were dull and vague. In them she saw a look of pain that she did not understand.

He moved his shoulders uneasily and she saw with amazement that he was trying to smile at her. It was a travesty of his usual bold easy smile, but she said uncertainly, "Then you trust me after all? You are not angry?"

He did not answer and she knew that he could not speak. He moved his shoulders again in the sketch of a shrug and she went on, "I had to ask Mrs. Buse here. She is dangerous. She can't rest until she thinks that she knows everything. That day in the shop, I showed them that I had something to hide and I saw them prick up their ears. I knew then that the only thing to do was to put them off with a bold gesture, so I asked them to see all over the house whenever they liked. That made them lose interest at once. I never thought that they would come, but something must have put them on the scent again. Let them come. They have given me plenty of time to prepare for them. I wonder why they did that; perhaps they are only ordinarily curious after all—but we must take no chances."

She looked at him again and saw that the colour had come back into his face. "You believe all this, don't you?" she asked.

"I believe you," he said slowly. "Don't know why, but I do. Anyway, I guess it's the only thing I can do. You had better tell me something more about these folks, so I can get them straight."

"Of course, I will tell you everything," she said. Now she felt lightheaded with relief. She could have laughed or cried equally easily. The words came rushing out in a ridiculous exaggerated way, but she did not care.

"Mrs. Buse keeps the shop in the village," she said. "She is squat and evil and very sharp. She is respectable and thrifty and quick and a good mother to her girls, but a spider is all of these things too, isn't it? That is what Mrs. Buse is like—a quick, grey, female spider. The daughter, Flora, is simple by comparison. She is a pretty red-headed girl, as pretty and as smooth as paint, but poisonous, poisonous. That is a strong word to use about such a young girl, but that is what she is. She is always with some man or other, but lately she has been going about with a young soldier, a fair, simple, good-looking boy with kind blue eyes. When I see them together it makes me furious. I see good and evil walking together. I hadn't thought of that until this moment, but that is what they are—a living allegory of good and evil."

"Say, what's all this?" he said. "You make them sound plenty exciting. The trouble with you is you're full of fancies. They will probably turn out ordinary, like everyone else."

"I tell you they are dangerous," she said. "I will have to be on my guard all this afternoon. There must be nothing out of the way showing. You must go and pack your suitcase and I will carry it down to the garage. No one in their senses would want to see inside an empty garage, would they? Especially if it were locked. You will be cold there, I am afraid, but we can't risk the stove, it smells of hot oil and they have sharp noses. Now I must hurry and get everything ready. Look at the time, nearly midday."

"There's plenty of time," he said. "Open your other letter."

"I can't be bothered with that now," she said, getting up from the table. "Don't you see that I must set the whole house in order? I have neglected it for days, it is filthy. If Mrs. Buse saw it as it is

she would know at once that something was wrong. Besides, I couldn't bear them to see it like this. It must be perfectly ready and tidy and polished for them."

"Better read your letter all the same," he said. "We don't want that Madge turning up for a week-end visit. That would sure complicate things."

"Oh, no, that wouldn't be like Madge at all," she said. "But imagine opening the door and finding her standing there in her khaki greatcoat and the cap with the badges and her week-end case in her hand. She would wear a scarf because of the mist and her nose would be a little blue! But don't frighten me. She is not coming. You don't know her—she never does anything in a hurry," but her hand shook as she opened the letter.

"I knew it," she said as she turned the page. "She is not coming, not yet at any rate. But she says that she is uneasy about me, that I haven't written to her since I came to the house. She wants to know if anything is wrong."

"There you are—I told you. You must write at once," he said. Now she saw that he was looking at her thoughtfully. "I'll tell you what to write," he said slowly, as if he were turning over a sudden idea in his mind. "You write like this: 'I'm extra busy. I'm settling into the house fine and don't you worry if you don't hear anything from me for quite a while.' Say: 'Everything is fine, couldn't be better, and I'll write again when I have time.' Now promise me that you'll write to-day and leave it for Johnny to post to-morrow."

"Very well, I promise," she said, smiling at his solemn voice. "But it isn't as important as all that, you know."

She rolled the letter into a ball and dropped it into her empty cup. "That settles Madge for the present," she said, as she began to clear the table, "but you see, they are all bestirring themselves. They are gathering their forces and converging on the house. Undoubtedly the house is not as safe as it has been. First there was Johnny—no,

before he came there was my father—didn't you say that I had hardly mentioned him before and to-day he has been continually in my mind? Then the Pennys with their dead rabbit, the Buses, and now Madge."

She laughed excitedly. "Let them all come," she cried. "We will be ready for them. We can face them together. What do they matter to us?"

"Steady, take it easy," he said. "One moment you are sitting here with a long face looking out of the window and not saying a word, and the next you are laughing and talking like a silly girl. Don't get yourself worked up. You'll need your wits about you this afternoon if the half of what you have let on about these two is true."

"Don't you worry," she said. "It will be fun. It will be like playing a sort of game of hide-and-seek. I will make circles round them, I promise you, and they will go away with their tails between their legs, no wiser than when they came. But you must do your part and lie low. We needn't be afraid. Now that we know and trust each other we can do anything."

She put the last plate on the tray and went round the table to him. Bending over his chair until her cheek was touching his hair, she whispered, "How foolish we are to mistrust each other even for one moment. After all these days we are close, so close. Please forgive me for what I thought just now. I am a foolish woman, but I want you to know everything that is in my heart. Although you will laugh at me, I want you to know, so I must tell you. Don't laugh. Listen. I'll whisper it. When I was sitting there looking out of the window I had the absurd idea that I had died, that I was dead there in the chair, that you had killed me."

He pushed his chair back and sprang away from her. "Be quiet," he said. "That is a fool thing to say. Haven't you got more sense than to say a thing like that?"

The table was between them again, but as she watched him he

backed away from her until he was standing against the window. She saw that his forehead was shining with sweat and that he kept touching his lips with his tongue, as if they were unbearably dry.

"What is the matter?" she cried. "What have I said?"

He put his hand into his pocket and took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. She saw that the hand was trembling, but as he put the handkerchief back into his pocket he said, "Forget it. It's nothing. Go on woman, go clean your house and leave me alone."

Still watching him doubtfully she put on her overall and buttoned it slowly. As she carried the tray into the scullery he called after her, "You must keep a hold on that tongue of yours. It will get you into trouble one fine day. Haven't you learnt yet that there are things it's better not to say?"

When she hung the damp drying-cloth on the line and picked up her duster and crossed the kitchen to the hall, he was still standing by the window with his head sunk between his hunched shoulders and his hands in the pockets of the brown tweed suit. At the door she looked back at him. He had lifted his head and was staring after her with a sombre look, a look so cold and heavy that she stood still and put her hands up to her heart. The next second she thought that she must have imagined it. Now he was staring at the floor again and there was no expression on his face at all. She slipped quickly into the hall and shut the door behind her.

IV

'How am I to get round all these rooms in a few hours when there is the neglect of a whole week to atone for?' Edwina thought, as she dusted the hall. 'Over the whole house is a shadow, a coldness. When I go with my duster into the sitting-room I know that the colours will be dull and lifeless, all the ornaments superfluous, and that there will be no meaning in anything. And when I have

finished downstairs I shall find the same look of indifference in the bedrooms. All over the house, even in the bathroom and landing and stairway, I shall find a cold and shabby loneliness.'

'And whose fault is this?' she asked herself as she polished the brass lamp-bracket above the chest. 'Mine? But am I not imagining the whole thing? If the house seems damp and cold and colourless, surely that is the fault of the mist? How could the house seem anything else with that grey blanket stretched across the windows? Once again my imagination is getting the better of me.'

"All the same," she said aloud, "a good brisk sweeping and polishing will make a difference."

Try as she might, she could not hurry. Her hands were clumsy, her feet slow. She started off well enough at sweeping out the sitting-room and washing down the kitchen tiles, but soon she forgot what she was doing; her hands moved slowly, more slowly, stopped altogether; then she started work on something different, leaving the floor half swept and a table half dusted. She knew that she was working without any form or plan and doing things in their wrong order. 'What is the matter with me?' she thought. 'Where is my oneness with the vast sisterhood of those who care for the home? At this rate I shall never be finished in time. The mist is having a bad effect on me. Nothing in the house seems real or solid any longer; this brush in my hand doesn't seem a real everyday brush, but rather a brush that I am using in a dream. Soon I shall sit down in an armchair or on the lowest step of the stairs and give up all pretence of cleaning my house.'

The clock on the sitting-room mantelpiece struck twelve as she was polishing the fire-irons. "Is it really less than an hour since I started work on the house?" she said. "It is only midday. I have plenty of time."

'Midday. Noon,' she thought, sitting back on her heels and looking up at the clock with a vague stare. 'Noon. The time when

everything pauses, the low water of the working day. Noon—was there ever such a sleepy word? No wonder that I have been finding it difficult to work. In properly conducted households the work of the day would be over and everyone would be thinking of their midday meal, of tidying up or washing the hands, or of sitting down and glancing at the newspaper. In some countries everyone at this time of day lies down to sleep out of the sun. No wonder I couldn't work. This is an unnatural time to be working—it is all wrong, and the house knows it. No wonder the house seems unreal, insubstantial, like a house in a dream.'

'But the work must be done,' she told herself. 'Now I know what is wrong I shall be able to do it—only I must set about it in a different way.'

A midday stillness lay over the house. The only sounds to be heard were those she made herself as she went from room to room. She worked slowly and carefully as if she were trying not to disturb someone who was sleeping. Her duster passed over the furniture with an even gentle movement; her brush stroked the rugs and chairs as if they were the skins of warm drowsy animals; even the carpet sweeper moved with a muted whirr. And slowly the house responded to all that she was doing; in this calm, this hush, this noontide pause, it was regathering its forces and settling more firmly into its walls. "We can hold what we have to hold," it seemed to say to her. "We can keep our secret and still present a bland, dignified face to the world."

At first, as she worked, she approved of the colourless look of the house. It seemed to her suitable to the time of day: there comes with the midday hush a gradual flatness over the world, which is as it should be at this time of rest. But as the afternoon began to lengthen she waited for the house to stir and the colours to show again. 'I mustn't try to hurry it,' she told herself as she dusted the landing. 'I must let the house wake in its own time, and be thankful

for this time off, this breathing space.' She stood up, and, leaning on the banisters, listened intently. 'He must be in the garage already,' she thought. 'The house and I are alone. How calm and quiet it seems, how empty.'

But the house was stirring. As she picked up her duster again she knew that the time of rest was over. She thought that she could feel a faint but distinct tremor passing through the house. Somewhere in the hidden depths of the house a stretching and stirring was taking place; an eye opened; a pulse began to beat more quickly. "Hurry," the house said to her. "The visitors will soon be here. We must be ready for anything. Finish what you have to do. Finish it. Finish!"

It was a quarter to three by the clock in the sitting-room. All was ready and waiting. The kettle was on to boil; the tea cups were on the tray in the kitchen with the biscuits and the plate of sandwiches; the fire was lit in the sitting-room, a clean towel was on the rail in the bathroom, the dog was firmly tied to his basket. 'And I am washed and brushed,' she thought. 'I have taken no chances and have changed into the kind of tweed coat and skirt that Mrs. Buse would expect to see me in. There is nothing else to be done. All is ready.'

She walked into the hall and stood by the front door. Her eyes went to the cupboard under the stairs where the garage keys were hanging from their hook. "They would be safer with him," she said aloud. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

As she hurried to unlock the door between the garage and the hall she thought that she heard a sound outside the house. "Quick! They are coming," she whispered, as the door opened a crack. "Here, take the keys and lock yourself in. You will feel safer then."

His hand, as it came through the door and took the keys from her, was as cold as ice against her fingers. "All will be well," she

whispered as she heard the key turn in the lock again. "But you mustn't move or make a sound, and don't you try and see anything through the keyhole. You must keep quite still."

She took up her position behind the front door again. 'I am not only as nervous as he is,' she thought, 'and sick with apprehension of what may happen this afternoon, but I am also excited, quite pleasantly excited. Now, I must pull myself together. I will cross my fingers, hold my thumbs, say a prayer—for here they come.'

V

The front door opened and closed. Three strangers were in the hall, in the fastness of the house, in the soft and secret places of the shell. As Edwina held out her hand to Mrs. Buse she had a moment of panic. She wanted, more than she had ever wanted anything before, to turn and run and hide herself deep in the house where they could not reach her.

Then her hand was taken in a small cold grip. Mrs. Buse, in a dark coat and a hard shining round black hat, was holding her hand and looking up into her face. Close to the door and side by side, stood Flora and the young soldier. She had not expected him, and the sight of him standing in her hall between the old woman and the girl upset her calculations. She had prepared herself to meet Mrs. Buse's cold penetrating stare and the sly upward glance under the pale lashes of Flora's swimming eyes, but this boy's trustful look unnerved her. She felt in some way disarmed before the battle had even begun.

"We thought as how you wouldn't mind if we brought Flora's friend along," said Mrs. Buse. "He met us outside the shop as we were leaving and carried my bag up for me. I have brought you some potatoes, Miss Marsh, and some meal for the dog. We knew you must be running short."

Now she saw that the girl and the young man were carrying a heavy string bag between them. They stood stiffly by the door as if they were two children posing for a photograph. Looking at their embarrassed faces she was suddenly sorry for them. She wanted to say, "I know neither of you wanted to come. Put the bag down. Open the door and run away into the mist together." Instead, she heard herself saying, "They look like Jack and Jill standing there, don't they, Mrs. Buse? I am sure that the hill must have been very steep."

Flora's face and neck flushed scarlet and she stared at her mother defiantly. The soldier looked from one face to the other in a puzzled way. Then Mrs. Buse said in her calm flat voice, "Put the bag down, Flora, and introduce your friend to Miss Marsh."

Flora took her hand from the bag and put it in the pocket of her loose grey coat. She hung her head so that the red curls under the damp blue woollen beret swung forward on each side of her face. 'How pretty the girl is standing there against the dark wood of the door,' she thought. 'What a picture she makes with her red hair and blue cap and the rough grey of her coat. I wonder if Ross is looking through the keyhole.'

She stepped in front of the girl and said quickly, "Never mind, Flora. I was only teasing. I have met your friend before in the shop, and I am glad you brought him along. How good of you both to drag that heavy bag all this way. But what are we doing standing here in the hall? Come on in and take off your wet things."

She put her hand on the girl's shoulder and took it quickly away again. 'I cannot stand her,' she thought. 'Even my skin crinkles with distaste when I am near her—the sharp, poisonous, pretty thing.'

She turned to Mrs. Buse who was struggling out of her tight coat. "I wondered if you would ever find the house on a day like this," she said. "It is good of you to come in such weather."

Her voice sounded insincere and stilted, but Mrs. Buse answered

readily, "Don't mention it, Miss Marsh. In these times we have got to help each other, that's what I always say. We wanted to come. It makes a change for us." She folded the coat and, with a quick glance round the hall, laid it on the chest. "None of us has properly seen the inside of the house," she said. "Old Mr. Stanton, he kept it shut like a fortress. You might have thought he had a harem to hide the way he went on. Lucky he went off to stay with his brother just before he was took ill, otherwise no one would have known it when he died. He could have rotted away up here without anyone being the wiser."

Flora gave a sudden shrill laugh and her mother said, "Take your coat off, girl, like Miss Marsh told you, and you, Jack Copely, give your boots a good wipe. It was real mucky coming over the fields, but the mist didn't put us out. There's next to nothing of it inland. It's only here, along the cliff and round this house, that it's so thick. Must say I can't make out why anyone should want to put a house up here when they could be cosy in the valley, but everyone to his own taste. Isn't that right, Miss Marsh?"

"Perhaps the poor old man liked the quiet and the sea air, as I do," she said. "Come into the sitting-room, there is a fire there."

When they were seated round the fire with the door shut between them and the hall, she felt a little easier. Now she could take a good look at them and make up her mind what it was they had come to see and just how dangerous they were. Mrs. Buse sat in the arm-chair by the fire with her hands spread out on her knees. At a first glance she looked a plump, comfortable woman, one who had worked hard and endured as a matter of course the experiences of marriage and child-bearing. It was only at a second glance that the shortness of her neck and the length of her arms were seen, and perhaps only she, Edwina, had noticed the hardness of her prominent bust, the sharpness of her small hooked nose, and the predatory look in her eyes. 'Or am I imagining these things,' she thought, 'because

I don't like Mrs. Buse and never will? And do I only dislike her because I know that she despises me?' She turned her head towards Flora and was surprised to see that the girl was sitting up in her chair and looking round the room in an eager, pleased way.

"Do you like my room, Flora?" she said.

"Oh yes, Miss Marsh. It's got such a lot of different things in it," the girl said. "Not only books and pictures like any other old room, but exciting things like that feather fan. Can I have a look at it?"

"Of course you can," she said. "Take a good look round while I fetch the tea."

"None of these things are new, you know," she said to Mrs. Buse as she set up the gate-legged table. "Most of them came from my father's house and have been stored away for more than twenty years, and some of them belong to Miss Selby."

"How lucky you have been, Miss Marsh, that a bomb didn't destroy them all, as happened to so many," said Mrs. Buse. "It's funny how some have lost everything while others have got off free—but then perhaps you had them tucked away in a safe place."

"As safe as anywhere else, in my old home town," she said. "But for that matter this part of the country must be as safe as anywhere else. I was working in London all the worst of it, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Buse. "Miss Selby told me. And then you had to be sent away to a nursing home, didn't you, Miss Marsh?"

She did not answer, but took the tablecloth from its drawer and spread it out carefully on the table. 'I gave her an opening which she was quick to take,' she thought. 'Why did I start that?' While she was trying to think of something to say, Mrs. Buse changed the subject.

"And how is Miss Selby?" she said. "Mrs. Penny said as how you had a letter from her. We all took to Miss Selby, although she wasn't long in the village—so young-looking and smart and quick, and knew what she wanted. 'Mrs. Buse,' she said to me, 'you are a

sensible woman. I would be much obliged if you could look my friend Miss Marsh up now and then. She knows no one in the neighbourhood, and I am worried about her being all alone in that house. You might drop me a line sometimes and tell me how she is looking.' Yes, that's what she said, and I have been ashamed of myself not coming round before, but I thought you would be along to the village again."

"How kind of you to worry about me, Mrs. Buse," she said. "It just shows what nonsense it is when people say that the Cornish are cold and unfriendly. I was busy settling in and the weather has been bad. Miss Selby is a dear friend, but inclined to take too much on herself. As for writing to her about me—I hope you will do no such thing."

"A promise is a promise," said Mrs. Buse, and shut her mouth firmly.

"Well, what about tea?" she said after a moment's silence. "Are you quite comfortable, Mrs. Buse, while I fetch the tea-tray? Flora, there are cigarettes in that box on the table, give one to your friend. I don't smoke, but I keep some for Miss Selby."

"Look at this, Mother," Flora cried from the other side of the room. "Isn't this a beauty?"

The girl came towards them holding out the peacock feather fan; the colours flashed as she unfurled it. She stood still in the middle of the room turning the fan from side to side, flicking it over and back with a turn of her wrist, holding it out for them to admire and snatching it away again.

"Look at the great eyes on it," she said. "Look at the colours. Have you ever seen anything like it?" Lifting both arms she held the fan spread out behind her head and laughed down at them excitedly. "How do I look?" she cried.

Flora stood with her weight on one foot, the other knee bent and turned in affectedly, the hip bone thrust out at an exaggerated angle, and her head thrown well back, but the cheap dress could

not disguise or spoil her young body. Against the hot blue and purple feathers the red hair gleamed. The pale eyes shone and slowly slid round towards the soldier.

Edwina thought, 'This unpleasant forward bit of a girl is as lovely as a flowering tree in springtime. How unfair that is,' and she, too, looked at the boy. 'What does he make of this behaviour?' she wondered. 'Surely he must see——?' But the look she saw on his face was one of simple greed. He might have been a child looking at an open box of chocolates.

The girl laughed triumphantly. "What a fan dance and a half I could do if I had two of these," she cried.

"Now, Flora," said Mrs. Buse, "what will Miss Marsh think of you? You go and put those feathers back where you found them and give a hand with the tea."

"No, no, Flora. No, really not, Mrs. Buse," she said. "Please stay where you are. I won't be a minute."

She had spoken too quickly and loudly. She felt their surprised looks following her as she crossed the room to the door.

Standing by the kitchen table she looked down at the tea-tray without seeing it. 'How dare that girl behave in that shameless way in my sitting-room,' she thought. 'What impudence—showing off her body like a tart.' The contemptuous ugly word rang in the room as if she had said it out loud. 'The trouble with me is that I am jealous,' she thought suddenly. 'Jealous of a cheap little girl.'

She lifted her head and looked round the kitchen. 'How foolish I am,' she told herself. 'I have no reason to be jealous now. If this visit had taken place a week ago it would have been very different. Then I was only a poor dry bitter husk of a woman. But now, even if I am no longer young, even if my body has never reminded anyone of a flowering tree, I have had all that this girl will ever have and more. Let her do what she can with her village lovers. She will never begin to know what I know now.'

She folded her arms across her breast as if they were hiding a secret. 'Yes,' she thought, 'let her have even this golden boy, this good one. His gentle warmth will be nothing to the dark fire I have known.'

Crossing the room to the Aga she picked up the kettle. As she made the tea she smiled to herself, a sly soft smile. She felt warm and light and released. 'Flora is no longer important to me,' she thought. 'I shall be able to look at her from now on almost with pleasure. Flora will not worry me again.'

As she picked up the tray she thought, 'The rest of the afternoon will go on from here. Really, it will be rather dull now.' Then she thought, more soberly, 'I have forgotten Mrs. Buse. She is still there to be dealt with. The afternoon is far from over yet.'

She put the tray back on the table and, bending down, undid the dog's lead. "Come with me," she whispered, looking over her shoulder at the door. "I didn't mean you to appear at all, but now I think I need you. Come and distract their attention."

To her surprise the dog was unwilling to move from his basket. She had to pick him up and set him on the floor and give him a push towards the door. "I am surprised at you," she said severely. "Surely you will do what you can to help me? I know that you don't care for company, but you don't put yourself out very often. Now, please be on your best behaviour. To-day is very important." He gave her one of his sharp quick looks, and, shaking himself, fell in behind her as she picked up the tray and crossed the kitchen.

In the hall she paused for a moment with the tray in her hands. She would have liked to go to the garage door to tell him softly, "Things are going well on this side of the door. I have got the better of Flora already. Now there is only Mrs. Buse left—the soldier does not count. Not much longer before they will be going away defeated, leaving us alone together," but of course it was not safe to do this, and, with only a quick glance at the door, she carried the tray into the sitting-room.

If anyone had been outside the window to draw back the curtains of mist and to look into the sitting-room, he would have seen what, at a first glance, looked a happy tea party, a party that had been going on for some time. He would have seen the fire burning merrily, as fires are supposed to do; the dog seated in his traditional place before the fire; the table with its white cloth and gold-edged tea-cups and saucers and the plate of sandwiches now nearly empty. He would have seen the two young people sitting side by side on the small curved sofa with their heads almost touching over a photograph album, and two women sitting and talking together across the fireplace. But the party was not a happy one. 'It now has a nightmarish quality,' thought Edwina. 'I feel as if I had been sitting here listening to Mrs. Buse for several years, although the clock on the mantelpiece assures me that it is for only half an hour.'

'Can this stream of words be directed at me for a special purpose?' she thought. 'Mrs. Buse sits there with her face red from the fire, her knees apart, and her hand raised in a solemn gesture, bringing all these words out of her squat body and weaving them into a web for me. Or is she only letting herself go about the village to an outsider as she seldom has a chance to do? Doesn't she see that these young people are listening to the more scandalous parts with all their ears, while they pretend to be busy with my photograph album? What is she saying now? Something about the house? I had better pay attention.'

"Old Mr. Stanton now," Mrs. Buse was saying, "him that had the house built up here in the first place—he was an odd, old gentleman, and no mistake. He thought the world of this house. You might have thought it was Buckingham Palace they was building up on the cliffs the way he went on. Many a time I have seen him stumping over the bridge on his way up here from the village, wearing his funny looking long coat and red scarf and a cap with the flaps

turned up on his great old head, waving a stick and talking away to himself. He drove the builder mad with his fussing and the way he watched every brick the men laid on. He would sit in the field all day on his camp stool and only come back to the village when the men knocked off work. And the money he spent—what with making the road and digging the well and all—but he wouldn't listen, just went on as he thought best. And then, after all that, he lived in the house only for a month or two. No time at all. Hardly time to make himself a home."

"That is exactly it, Mrs. Busc," she said loudly. "He didn't make himself at home. The house was never really his. He has left no impression of himself here. Please don't talk of him again. You see, I like to think that the house is so much mine that it never belonged to anyone else. If it had not been for the war I would have built my own house, starting from the bottom with the first brick. As it is, it is the next best thing—a shell that some dead unknown creature has left behind and that I found quite empty, swept bare and clean by the wind and the sea. It fits me as if it had been made for me. Don't mention that old man again. I don't care to hear even his name."

She knew that the two on the sofa were staring at her, but Mrs. Busc's expression did not alter. "Just as you like, Miss Marsh," she said.

Almost without pause her voice went on as if there had been no interruption. "You must be glad to be in your own house. As I always say to Flora, the best thing that can happen to any woman is to have a place of her own. Not that the girl listens to me. She's the same as all these young ones, nothing in their heads except men and a good time. 'You find yourself a steady one,' I say to her. 'You get through with all this foolishness in the lane of an evening or you will find yourself with more than you bargained for one of these days.'"

"Really, Mrs. Buse," she said, but Mrs. Buse brushed her objection away with a wave of her hand.

"My girl, you get yourself fixed up with a man who can't get away from you before you start all that," I say to her. "All that is fine and easy started. It's wrong how quickly it's done. It should have been made more difficult. What's a few minutes besides nine months, and each month worse than the last? And then, what comes at the end, that's not to be sneezed at, my girl," I say to her. "I know. I have been through it all five times." "Mother," she says to me, "you just don't know anything. You leave me alone. I can take care of myself." "So that's it," I say. "Now see here, Flora, I won't have you messing yourself up with any of these nasty tricks. I would rather far you took what was coming to you straight." "

Mrs. Buse paused for a moment, wet her lips with her tongue and sighed a deep sigh.

"Flora can hear everything we are saying," Edwina said, and she looked at the sofa appealingly.

"Don't you worry about them, they are not listening," said Mrs. Buse. "They are too taken up with themselves to waste their time on us."

She saw that this was now true. The two heads were bent, two hands were decorously turning the pages of the album, but it was plain that the sofa had become its own world, a world far removed from the circle about the fireplace, and swinging in a finer, headier air than that of the sitting-room.

"Jack Copely now," said Mrs. Buse in a slightly lower voice, "he's the sort I have in mind—a good clean-living lad and an only son. His father has a fine farm near Bude. When this soldiering is finished he will be sitting pretty. But nothing will come of it, you wait and see, for all she's sitting there, holding hands with him it will come to nothing. He's not her sort. 'Too good for her,' I tell her, and she only laughs. She's got her eye on that Captain, the one with the

ginger moustache who comes down to the Cove. The trouble I have had with that girl, you wouldn't believe, Miss Marsh. Never a day's peace since the day she was born, and for the nine months before that, I reckon—ever since the very night—excuse me, Miss Marsh, but you wouldn't believe the trouble she gave. She's my youngest by five years. I had come to think I was finished with all that when she up and started. Sick I was every morning for the first three months, which I never was with the others. And then the way she kicked about—it was all I could do to get any sleep. 'The Devil's in this one,' I said to Mr. Buse. Then twenty-four hours she went and took, and she my fifth, and weighed only six pounds after all that. And that wasn't the end of it, not by any means. Such a difficult child to rear you have never seen. My milk went and dried up as if it was bewitched. 'Never happened before,' I said to Mr. Buse, 'there was always plenty for the others.' The expense we were put to over that child! The trouble! And it's gone on ever since. No one knows what women have to put up with, Miss Marsh. Whenever I see a girl walking about free and easy and as tossy as anything, I say to myself, 'You wait!'

The room was too warm. She had made the fire too big, or the five bodies crowded together there were too much for the room. It seemed to her that all the available space was filled and overflowing with a suffocating animal warmth; but she made no effort to get up to open a window. She put her head back on the cushion of her chair, shut her eyes, and let the stream of words flow on. Now it was a turgid stream, heavy with details of slow and difficult births, of long-drawn-out and ill-starred pregnancies. She tried not to listen but the words sank of their own weight into her mind. She knew that she had only to make a sudden firm gesture, and the stream would dry up at its source, but she could not move.

The girl's laugh roused her. It was so sharp and thin and mocking that it seemed to her to clear the atmosphere of the room as a draught

of cold air would have done. She sat up in her chair and pulled her skirt down over her knees.

Mrs. Buse was saying, "But all said and done, that's what we women are for. We wouldn't change it if we could. Take it all in all, they are worth it. A child is worth all the bother it gives, isn't that so, Miss Marsh?"

"How should I know, Mrs. Buse?" she said, speaking as lightly as she could, and trying to smile. "I think that you have forgotten that you are talking to an unmarried woman, a spinster."

Mrs. Buse was not disconcerted. She gave her a long slow look that lasted while a handkerchief was taken from the tight belt and passed across the red face and put back in its place again. "And more's the pity," she said. "It's a waste, that's what it is, a fine well-made woman like yourself. And it's when you begin to feel old, Miss Marsh—that's the time you need to have the new ones springing up round you. That's no time to be alone."

The expression in the small staring eyes changed. Mrs. Buse leant forward and said, "All said and done, Miss Marsh, a home's no home without a child."

Silence fell on the sitting-room. She bent her head to hide her face. 'How did Mrs. Buse know just where to aim?' she thought. 'How did she know where I am most vulnerable?'

She looked down at the dog. 'Help me,' she cried silently to him. 'Can't you see that I am out of the battle for the moment? Run out into the middle of the carpet and turn a somersault or beg or offer a paw, and set them laughing and exclaiming while I find my handkerchief.' The dog did not move. He stared back at her from the hearthrug and it was only by the movement of his ears towards her that she knew he had heard. 'This is the second time you have failed me,' she said silently to him.

The silence deepened about them. The two on the sofa shut the album and looked at her expectantly. 'The afternoon has reached a

turning-point,' she thought. 'The tea part of the party is over and now the real business of the afternoon begins. Mrs. Buse, after wrapping me in her web of words, has, by one shrewd blow, left me unnerved and trembling. It was a painful blow, a blow to the heart, but I am far from finished yet.' She lifted her head and looked at them defiantly.

Mrs. Buse met her look calmly. "Now, Miss Marsh," she said, "can we see the house? Flora and I, we want to say that we have been all over it."

Edwina stood up and looked down at them. Her courage had come back to her. 'All will be well if I keep my wits about me,' she told herself, and she smiled as she said, "Of course you can see the house. That is what you came for, isn't it? You shall see every inch of it. We will begin with the kitchen." Opening the door wide, she led the way across the hall.

The kitchen had never looked so compact and friendly; it was obviously on its best behaviour before the visitors. She saw that it could be trusted to co-operate with her in every way. The check curtains had taken on a new crispness, the window panes shone, and from the tiles came a rosy glow of cleanliness.

"A nice little room," said Mrs. Buse. "Is that yellow thing in the corner your new-fangled cooking stove?"

"Yes, this is my Aga," she said, laying her hand affectionately on the shining yellow side. "Isn't he a beauty? You wouldn't believe what a comfort he is to me. Here is his special food; I am having great difficulty in getting it and he doesn't do well on anything else."

Flora laughed. "You talk as if it were an animal, Miss Marsh," she said, "or else some kind of slave, anyway, something alive."

"Hush, Flora," she said, putting her finger to her lip. "Don't let him hear you. This is my household god, he mustn't be offended. The house simply couldn't go on if he turned the light of his countenance from us."

She had only meant to make a joke, but she could see that it had been a mistake. All of them were staring at her. Mrs. Buse's mouth was drawn into a thin, disapproving line.

"Come closer and look at the oven, Mrs. Buse," she said quickly. "These are the hot plates."

After a moment Mrs. Buse bent stiffly and peered into the oven. As she straightened herself again she said, "Very clever, I'm sure, but I don't see myself getting used to one. I'll stick to my old range a bit longer."

"It's an ugly thing, isn't it, Jack?" said Flora. "It sits there like a great yellow toad."

They turned away from the Aga and she could see that they had finished with the kitchen. Now she knew that they had planned to take only a quick look into every room to make sure that the house held no secrets, perhaps to assess the amount of money she had spent, or to seize on any detail that would confirm Miss Marsh as the strange character they already knew her to be.

"They shan't get away with it so easily," thought Edwina angrily. "They came to the house on the least suspicion, a faint scent, a vibration that set their always alert minds quivering. Such minds are always on the trail of anything that is passionately hidden, anything that, to their raised and eager noses, smells the least bit high. Now that they are here I shall make them examine every detail and look into every hole and corner. Yes, I shall rub their noses into it until they have had more than enough."

She showed them the sink in the scullery, the larder, the shelves in the cupboards, the boiler, and the coal shute. She showed them the Yale lock on the door, the alarum clock and the dog's basket under the table. Mrs. Buse's face took on a stubborn look; she followed everywhere she was led, making polite comments in her flattest voice, but Flora soon gave up all pretence at interest and leant against the door, yawning behind her hand. The soldier stood

by the door, looking down at the floor and moving his hands nervously. As she caught sight of his unhappy face Edwina relented.

"Well, that is about all there is to the kitchen," she said. "Now, let us go upstairs."

They crowded into the hall again and she tried to hurry them across this danger zone, turning her head resolutely away from the garage door, but Mrs. Buse was not to be hurried; as if she had said to herself, 'Two can play at this game,' she examined in her deliberate way the carved chest, the Persian rug, the lamp-bracket, and then looked fixedly at the empty niche above the door.

"What is that for, Miss Marsh?" Mrs. Buse said.

"Oh, that's only an idea of Miss Selby's," Edwina said. "Now, what do you think of my stair carpet? I cut it down myself from the one we used at home."

"What could Miss Selby want with an empty hole like that?" Mrs. Buse said. "Whatever was it for?"

Before she could answer the soldier said hoarsely, "If you'll excuse me, Miss, I'll wait outside the house."

He was looking directly at her. His eyes were astonished.

"Jack Copely," Flora cried. "What has come over you? You'll be frozen out there in the mist. Are you ill?"

The boy's face had become a sickly white. His blue eyes refused to meet their eyes and he swayed slightly as he stood in the middle of the hall with his hands clenched at his sides.

"I'm all right," he said in a strangled voice. "I'm sorry—only let me out of here."

"Where are your manners, Jack?" said Mrs. Buse. "Whatever is the matter? I'm sure Miss Marsh won't mind showing you where the lavatory is, if that's the trouble. We are all human after all."

"No, no," he said. He looked round the hall, shuddered, and passed his hand over his eyes. "Let me out," he said in a shrill, hysterical voice. "I don't like it here. Let me get out of this house."

"Let him go," Edwina said. "Don't bother him. Just let him go. He will come to himself outside. Perhaps the house is a bit close."

He looked directly at her then. She thought she saw fear and pity in his eyes and she moved quickly until she was between him and the garage door. What had he seen? Had he seen anything? She looked quickly round the hall; there was nothing there for him to see.

He was gone almost at once. They heard his heavy boots on the kitchen tiles and the sound of the back door slamming.

"Well!" said Mrs. Buse, "whatever do you make of that?"

For a moment Edwina could not trust herself to speak; then she told herself firmly, "There was no such look in his eyes, how could there have been? I am letting my imagination run away with me again. That boy is not important. I must keep my attention on Mrs. Buse—that is where the danger lies."

As she led the way upstairs she managed to say lightly, "Poor fellow, of course he was bored to tears. Looking over a house is a woman's business."

No one answered and they crossed the landing in silence with the dog keeping close to their heels. She felt uneasy. "They are up to something," she thought, looking sideways at Mrs. Buse. "I sense danger. Have I missed anything? I must watch Mrs. Buse more closely. I must be doubly careful."

"I will show you my room first," she said. "You will notice that the cupboards were built in when they built the house, as were the linen cupboards on the landing. A good idea, don't you think so?"

She could have sworn that she had left the room as neat and circumspect as a room could be. How could she have forgotten to unpin the rose from the curtains or to take the shawl from the bed? The floating purple drapery on the dressing-table mirror gave the room an extraordinarily rakish air; it looked as she had never seen it look before. "It is doing it on purpose," she thought. "I couldn't

have left it in this state. The house is divided in itself. The kitchen and the sitting-room were models of discretion, but ever since we came upstairs the atmosphere has changed. This room has never liked me.'

She looked with despair at the red dress on the floor, at the feathered slippers left carelessly on the rug, at the pink silk knickers swinging from the arm of the chair, at the pink powder spilled on the dressing-table. And the room smelled of cheap scent. She knew, without turning her head, that somewhere a scent bottle had been overturned, although the curtains now hung without moving by the closed windows. 'If the room is trying to show that I am a doubtful character it is certainly succeeding,' she thought. The polished table by her bed winked up at her and she nearly said out loud, 'Now you are overdoing it.'

Mrs. Buse was standing in the middle of the room looking about her; there was no expression on her face, but, beside her, Flora looked frankly eager; the red head was thrown back, and the sharp nose was lifted. 'Like a dog casting about for the trail,' she thought, 'a little thin red bitch.'

"What a huge looking-glass," the girl said. "Mother, why can't we have a glass like that? And what big cupboards."

She saw that the cupboard doors were wide open. That morning she had arranged the clothes from the hat-box on the shelves, but she was sure that she had closed the doors carefully on them. Now, from one side of the hanging cupboard, the colours of the plaid coat and the sequin-covered jacket shouted at her across the room, while, on the other, her tweed coat and black dress looked unnaturally smug and dull. She saw that the shelves showed the same division: on one side were neat folded underclothes, two sober handbags, rolls of stockings; on the other, showing themselves cheerfully to the room, were piles of cheap lace and pink and green silk, a heap of beads, coloured gloves, exaggeratedly-heeled

shoes. Seldom could two opposed tastes have been so plainly shown.

"Look at these lovely feather slippers and at the gold sandals," Flora cried excitedly. "Wherever did you get them, Miss Marsh? What a lovely lot of clothes you have! May I look?"

"Now, Flora," said Mrs. Buse. "You behave yourself. How do you know Miss Marsh wants you looking into her cupboards?"

She met the look in the cold grey eyes as calmly as she could. "Let Flora do as she likes," she said. "I expect that she is as fond of pretty things as I am."

After a moment Mrs. Buse settled herself in the blue armchair as if she expected to sit there for some time. Flora, after throwing a nervous look at her mother, reached out to touch the coloured silks.

"Mother, have you ever seen a *négligée* like this before, except on the films?" the girl said.

"Can't say I have," said Mrs. Buse.

Now Edwina wanted to laugh. As she stood with burning cheeks by the dressing-table it seemed the only thing left for her to do. Mrs. Buse was leaning forward in the chair, staring into the open cupboards. Her mouth was open and the tip of her tongue was showing. 'She looks like a spider who has seen the fly fall into the net she has spun for it,' thought Edwina. 'I am certainly caught now. I can hear what Mrs. Buse is thinking. What a poor small flimsy trashy fly I must seem. This foolishness can't be the secret that Mrs. Buse expected to find in the house.' As she watched the girl eagerly touching the hanging clothes, she thought, 'I don't know which side of the cupboards offends me most, the superiority of the one or the cheap vulgarity of the other. Neither has anything to do with me. Neither is the truth. I am not cold and dull, neither am I a loud unpleasant woman. Or is this the truth, after all? Is the real Edwina a freak, the strange two-headed creature that the room

is showing her to be?' Now she did not want to laugh. She could have cried.

'I must pull myself together,' she told herself. 'This is painful for me. It will be all over the village by this evening. But it isn't important. What does it matter? It is really the best thing that could have happened because now they are both in full cry after a false scent. I should be glad that this poor foolish red herring of mine has been drawn across their path. Mrs. Buse thinks that she has won. What does it matter what she thinks of me if only he is safe? I must let her think that she now knows the secret in the house, the skeleton in my cupboard. She will go away satisfied. I should be glad that this has happened, although I will never find pleasure in these clothes again.'

"Oh, Miss Marsh, look at this coat covered with shiny beads and at this silk bathing dress," Flora cried. "You should really wear some of these things in the village and give us all a treat."

"Be quiet girl!" said Mrs. Buse. "Shut the cupboard at once." She stood up, smoothing the front of her dress. "It's getting late, Miss Marsh," she said. "We should be getting along."

"But won't you see the rest of the house before you go?" she said. "I should hate you and Flora to miss anything. Yes, shut the cupboard, Flora, if you have seen all you want to. I am glad you like my clothes. Some of them are rather bright for the country, I suppose. After all, as Miss Selby is always telling me, this isn't London. But a bit of colour is a good thing in these sad times. One can't have too much colour in one's life, Mrs. Buse. That's what I always say."

Her voice sounded shrill and forced, but she did not care. All that mattered was that the afternoon should be completed, the plan carried out to the last detail, and that they should go away. Determinedly she led the way on to the landing.

"This is the spare room," she said, throwing the door open. "Or rather, I should say Miss Selby's room."

His room was ready: there it was, astonishingly empty, as clean and blank as only an empty room can be. She felt proud of it—it had loyally hidden every trace of him—no one would ever guess. But no one wanted to look at this room, the most important and dangerous room in the house. Mrs. Buse gave it one brief glance and turned towards the stairs.

“Very nice, I’m sure,” she said, “but now we must be going.”

“There is still the bathroom,” said Edwina. “Does anyone want to powder their noses or wash their hands? You must just look inside, anyway. I shouldn’t like you to say that you hadn’t seen all that there was to see.”

“We have seen all we need to, thank you kindly, Miss Marsh,” said Mrs. Buse.

As she walked down the stairs Mrs. Buse’s back said plainly that she would not waste more time on Miss Marsh. The tortoiseshell slides flashed in the sandy-grey hair as she passed under the landing window.

Edwina followed with Flora close behind her. The girl said softly in her ear, “I shall be having a nice little house too, one fine day, and not so long off, I shouldn’t wonder—I have only to say the word. And clothes too, lots of clothes, all I want, more than you have—you wait and see.” She did not turn her head or show that she had heard, but Edwina could not prevent herself from smiling a small triumphant smile as she thought, ‘No one has ever been even the least bit jealous of me before.’

Now they were back in the hall, back where they had started. The afternoon was nearly over.

“We must really be getting on,” Mrs. Buse said. “It will be dark before long. Flora, fetch me my hat. I left it in there by the fireplace.”

“Here is your coat, Mrs. Buse,” she cried gladly. “Are you sure you will be warm enough? There is a glass in the sitting-room if you would like to put your hat on in there.”

Now that they were going she could not do too much for them. She held out the grey coat for Flora. "How pretty your hair looks under that blue cap," she said softly. Now she did not care if the girl were standing in full view of the keyhole of the garage door. She even moved generously back a little. 'Take a last look at the pretty thing,' she thought. 'This is your last chance—they are going, they are going—in a moment they will be gone.'

"Why, Miss Marsh," said Flora, pointing suddenly at the garage door, "there is a door we haven't seen before. What is in there?"

There was no time for evasion. "That is the garage," she said. "It is locked."

She saw the girl's face sharpen. The red head lifted. "I didn't know there was a garage to the house," Flora said. "I thought that lean-to part was a shed, but of course it has got those big sliding doors. Why is it locked? Can't we see inside?"

"Of course you can," she said, without hesitating. "If you really want to. There is nothing there except some empty packing-cases. Miss Selby's Austin was requisitioned at the beginning of the war, but we hope to get another one day. I think the key is upstairs. I will run up and fetch it."

"Come on, Flora," said Mrs. Buse from the front door. "What do you want to go poking about in an empty garage for? It's getting late enough, and what about Jack? For all you know he's still waiting about outside for you. Say good-bye to Miss Marsh and come along do."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Flora said. "Bye-bye, Miss Marsh. I liked your feather fan."

"Good-bye, and thank you for the tea," said Mrs. Buse, holding out her hand in its wrinkled black glove. The small eyes looked up into her face for the last time. "It's a nice little house," said Mrs. Buse's flat voice. "A well-made cosy house and all got up very nice

and comfortable, but it wouldn't do for me, Miss Marsh. I couldn't live out here all alone. I would be afraid of ending up peculiar like."

She shut the door quietly behind them. "They are gone," she thought. "It is over. How beautiful is the sound of departing feet growing fainter on the path!"

She stood still in the centre of the hall, listening intently. For all she knew this sudden quiet which had fallen on the house might be a trap. She would wait until she was certain that they were not coming back before she opened the garage door. She felt uneasy, as if she had forgotten something, something important. She looked up the well of the stairs. The light was going from the hall; already the landing was in shadow. Evening had come. The afternoon was over.

Edwina pushed the bolt across the front door and fastened the chain. The hall was growing dark. Outside the mist still swirled across the windows, but, here in the hall, here in the house, surely all was warm and safe? "They have gone," she whispered. "The danger is over. We have won. I mustn't be silly—I am tired, that is all." She leant against the garage door as if she were very tired and let her forehead rest against the panels.

As she leant there she thought that she could feel the house closing in round her; it seemed to stir and sigh and stretch itself with relief and then to settle itself fold by fold, coil by coil, until the last traces of the intruders had disappeared. Now her fears were gone. Softly in her ear the house was singing through all the empty spaces of its rooms: "Now comes the empty lovely night, the lovely night and empty days, for the visitors are gone, the visitors are departed. We are alone."

She lifted her head and said, "They are gone. It is over. You can come out now."

There was a sound of something moving in the garage. The key rasped in the lock. She stood back and opened her arms.

VI

It was eight o'clock in the sitting-room.

"Are you sure that they didn't see anything?" he said. "It seems to me from what you say that the old woman was on to something before she left."

"I am quite sure," she said. "I have told you that, for all I know it was an innocent tea party, that they came only to look at a house they had heard a lot about. All the rest could easily be my imagination."

"You and your imagination," he said. "You put a stopper on that imagination of yours and try and see things straight. It's all very fine for you to sit there as calm as you please, but this matters to me."

From her chair by the fire she watched him limp backwards and forwards between the fireplace and the windows, pausing for a moment at the end of his beat as if he were surprised to find the sitting-room so cramped and small, and then flinging himself round, using the walking-stick as a pivot, and setting off again. Backwards and forwards he went across the carpet until she could not stand it any longer.

"Do sit down, Ross," she said, as calmly as she could. "You will only make your ankle swell again. Look, you haven't finished your supper after all the trouble I took bringing it in here for you. Come and sit down and eat it up and then I will get you a glass of brandy and warm water. That will do you good. I am sure you caught a chill in that cold garage."

"Now don't start getting at me," he said, but after a moment he sat down and pulled the tray towards him.

"You took your time this afternoon," he said. "Your party went on for hours. Couldn't you have got rid of them before? I wouldn't

have let myself be stuck in that ice-hole if I had known it was going to be for all that time."

"Where would you have gone then—outside in the mist?" she said. "Or would you have joined the party here?"

"Now, don't you try and be smart. That sarcastic stuff doesn't suit you," he said. "You stick to your own line and leave that clever business to the sharp ones, like that red-headed piece."

"Then you managed to get a good look through the keyhole after all," she said, smiling. "Flora is a pretty little thing, isn't she? She is our village belle."

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all. I shouldn't think that there are many round here like her. It's funny that she's still going round. You would think she would have been snapped up long ago."

"Why, the girl is only seventeen," she said. "She had that boy with her, didn't she, that young soldier?"

"Oh, that one——" he said. "I took a look at him too. It was a shock, I can tell you, seeing that battle-dress in the hall. You should have warned me. A soft-looking sort of guy, I thought him."

"He is much too good for her, anyway. He is a decent boy and she is a nasty little thing," she said. "As a matter of fact she has a bad name for herself in the village already."

"You don't surprise me," he said. "I bet all the boys are after her. She's the kind that gets a man where he feels it most. She would be hot, too hot to hold, but I wouldn't mind taking her on. I would give her something to remember me by."

"Why, Ross, you are exaggerating," she said lightly. "She is only a pretty little girl." As she looked across the hearthrug at him she could not stop herself from saying, "She is a bit on the thin side, and she has got knock knees, you know."

He laughed loudly, putting his head back on the chair-cushion and showing his teeth. "You women," he said. "You are all the same. Knock knees has she? I don't know, I wish I did."

She hung her head with shame and clenched her hands together in her lap. At once she heard him throw his fork and knife down angrily and get up from the table.

"Jesus!" he said. "Jesus—can't you see I was only laughing at you? Must you always lay yourself wide open? Stop it, or I'll be getting really wild. See here now, I didn't mean a word of it. What would I want with a skinny bit like that? There's nothing to her, I tell you. She's only another girl. I have seen and handled dozens like her, she's no use to me. Now you, you are a woman. You are what I need. You are everything I need a woman to be—big and sweet and soft and easy, and you are stupid and you are afraid of me. That suits me. That suits me fine. Don't you worry yourself. I don't like them young and hard. Jesus! What else do you want me to say? You are what I want, I tell you."

She looked up at him with swimming eyes and then covered her face with her hands. "But I am old enough to be your mother," she said. "What we have done has been wrong."

"Wrong?" he said. "You are always talking about things being wrong. Right or wrong—who's to say? I guess right is anything you want it to be if you want it enough. And what's it got to do with it how old you are? That's for me to say. But, if that's the way it takes you, be my mother if it will keep you quiet."

He turned away from her and began to walk up and down the room again.

"Why are we talking in this unkind and vulgar way?" she said sadly. "Perhaps it would be better if we didn't talk at all. We have only to open our mouths to start this foolish ugly wrangling. I should have thought that, after this week we have spent shut up together in the small space of this house, we would have grown so close to each other that there could be no room for unkindness between us. I had thought that after all we had taken from each other we were now as much one person as any two human beings

could ever be. Is fear the only thing that still keeps us uneasily together? Are we only sitting here because we are afraid? Oh, I don't believe it. I believe that we were drawn together because of the great need in ourselves. I believe that we came together out of the darkness, rushed together, each from our own empty world, and found what we had always needed. Isn't it true that, however strange and unlikely it seems, you have found a peace with me that you never knew before? Come and sit down. Look, here is the house still round us. We still have a roof between us and the night. Here is warmth and peace and safety. Sit down and be quiet and eat your food. We don't know when we shall sit like this again."

He came slowly across the room to her, hesitated a moment, standing by her chair and looking down at her in a bewildered, resentful way. Then he moved his hand impatiently, as if he were brushing something away, and sat down in his chair.

"I don't want any more to eat," he said. "I'm not hungry. Where's that dog? Here you, James, catch hold of this."

The dog hurried forward and snapped at the meat in a way she had never seen him use before. She wanted to say sharply, "Don't give him anything. He has had his dinner," but she said nothing. The room was growing calm and smooth again, as a pool does when the last ripple of the disturbance spreads out and disappears, and she did not want to set it moving again. When the dog had finished the last scraps of meat and bread, she got up quietly and put the tray on the table by the window. Unlocking the cupboard under the bookshelves she took out the flask of brandy and, adding a little water from the jug on the tray, set the filled glass in the grate to warm. This she did, as she had done, every night, but now she did it as if it had become a soothing ritual. As she locked the flask in the cupboard again, he said:

"I can't stand any more talking. I'm going to turn on the radio."

Music poured into the room. She sighed and, sitting down in her

chair, picked up her knitting and let it rest in her lap; it lay there comforting and warm on her thighs as a cat, or perhaps, as a sleepy child would have done. She folded her hands across it, rested her head on her cushion, and closed her eyes.

The music covered them like a cloak. Under it they were drawn together, swung apart and swung together again. Somewhere, far out in the night, a great orchestra was playing for the two of them sitting there by the fire. The room hummed with sound. The music changed. It was louder. It seemed to her that everything in the room vibrated in a hymn of praise. She would have liked to add her own voice to the music, to give thanks for the warm peace of the room in the golden lamplight and the red firelight, for all the coloured small things in the room, the familiar, the dear, the reassuring things, and for the picture the room now presented of an old well-known version of human happiness: of two sitting together with the tamed, the friendly, symbolical beast at their feet, beside a fire and beneath a roof of their own; of two with years before them and years behind, and between them only the warmed space of the hearthrug that, in a second, by a movement of a hand, need be no space at all.

A touch on her knee roused her. Half opening her eyes she saw that the dog had left his place on the hearthrug and was leaning against the length of her leg with his head resting on her knee. She had known him creep close to her before when music was played; the high notes of the violins always set his nerves quivering. She put her hand on his head and suddenly the circuit between them was complete.

She looked cautiously round the room. 'Be careful,' she told herself. 'We are not alone. Remember the scene in the bedroom this morning.' But under the cover of the music she felt as safe as she would have done if she had been sitting there alone, with the dog. 'Why not?' she asked herself. 'This is all that is needed to

complete the picture. Two and a dog are all very well, but how much better if there were also a third.'

She shut her eyes and began to stroke the dog's head, carefully and gently, as if she were stroking the head of a child. 'Come in from your playing among the flowers in the sunshine,' she said silently. 'Leave the too brilliant sunshine and the huge impossible flowers for a little while and sit here by me. Are you feeling tired from too much playing? Is the firelight making you sleepy? Of course, you should have been in bed hours ago. Now, let me see—how tall are you to-day? This is important because this purple jersey I am knitting is for you and how sad it would be if it were the wrong size. The colour will make your eyes look very dark—that is why I chose it. The sleeves are twelve inches long—will they fit you to-day? Now, listen carefully. Just to please me and to show me how you look in your new jersey, go and stand by that chair on the other side of the fireplace. Yes, close to his chair where I can see you both together.'

Opening her eyes slowly she looked across the hearthrug. There was the chair and the man's head resting against the cushion: the firelight shone on the high cheekbones and the hollows of the eyes and on the hands hanging loosely across the knees. Her heart beat painfully as, slowly and cautiously, she turned her eyes until she was looking into the shadows beside the chair.

For a second, as the music rose in the room, she thought that she saw a gleam of purple, a small white face. She tried to nod her head and to smile encouragingly, but her heart was beating so wildly with happiness that she could not see.

The music was gone and the room was full of a rushing sound like the sound of waves falling on a stony beach. She knew that it was the clapping of hundreds of distant hands. Somewhere a concert was over and people were streaming out into the night. The dog moved his head from under her hand. She looked at the shadow

beside the chair. The shadow, she saw, was empty. There was nothing there at all.

He leant back in his chair and turned the dial of the radio. "That's the end of that," he said.

She looked down at the dog. There was no longer a secret between them. She knew that the current was broken and would never be joined again. 'Now you are free to be only yourself,' she told him silently. 'Run along—I won't worry you any more.'

'How could I have been so foolish,' she thought. 'What a stupid sentimental game I have been playing all these years. I should be ashamed. I know now that an empty space is better than a foolish pretence.' She looked at the shadow beside the chair and for a second she thought that she saw there a small misshapen pale thing grinning out at her from behind the man's elbow. 'No, no——' she thought, covering her eyes with her hand. 'Let it die in peace—it was only an innocent foolish sentimental part of myself. So much in the world is changing and dying. I am wrong to weep even a few tears for such a small private death. Another part of myself has gone. Everything is going. Soon I shall be left with nothing.' When she looked up again her eyes were dry.

"I can't get a sound out of this darned thing," he said, turning the dials furiously. "What's happened to it?"

After a moment she sighed and picked up her knitting and said, "Better leave it alone. You wouldn't believe what horrible sounds that cross-grained little box can produce. Sometimes it makes me think of a dwarf with too large a larynx. Please leave it alone."

Her voice was lost in the spate of noise which now filled the room. "Please turn it off," she cried. "How can you stand such a noise after that music?" He could not have heard her, but he shrugged his shoulders and turned a dial and the noise stopped abruptly.

He pushed his chair back and began to limp up and down the room again.

"To-morrow, whatever happens, I'm going to make a break for it," he said. "I can't stand this any longer. Where I'll go or what I'll do I don't know. All this week we have talked and argued and haven't decided anything. What have we been doing all this time? We should have had everything cut and dried by now."

He stood still in the middle of the room and put his hands up to his head. "I can't think—that's the trouble," he said. "I have been too long in this house. I have gone soft. I'm no good any more. I must get out of here or I'll go nuts. Don't try and stop me. If it rains or snows, I'm going to-morrow."

"Very well, go to-morrow," she said. "There's no need to shout at me."

She kept her eyes on her knitting, but she knew exactly how he looked as he stood in the middle of her carpet. He looked altogether out of place in the limits of her sitting-room. Although she had come to realize by now that he was not really a large man, it seemed to her that his black head touched the ceiling and that if he flung his arms wide, they would stretch from wall to wall. He was wearing the yellow sweater and the crude and violent colour made all the other colours in the room pale before it. She knew that his eyes were fixed on her and she bent her head lower over her knitting. 'I can do nothing with him this evening,' she thought. 'He is wild—beyond my reach.'

"Come and sit down," she said beseechingly. "We will talk it over, make a plan."

"How many times have we talked it over?" he said. "And the plans we have made—what good have they been? There's no way out. I'll be stuck in this house for ever."

"Don't talk so wildly," she said. "Of course, there is a way out."

"This country gets me down," he said, turning away from the hand she stretched out to him. "I haven't a chance here. This tame tight little place with the sea round it for a wall, a prison wall—run a few

miles any way and there you are staring at the sea. How you all stand it all the time, I don't know. There's not even room to stretch and take a good deep breath. What a place—everyone expecting you to behave like everyone else and staring at you as if you were a wild beast if you don't."

He began to walk up and down the room again. "If only this house were somewhere else," he said. "I could slip away and no one would see me go, and if they did they wouldn't care. If only we were somewhere new and big, somewhere we could move without bumping into folks all the time, somewhere you can breathe good and be yourself. Canada now, or Australia, or the States—but Canada would be best. That's a place. I was there a year once, knocking round with Mike Stewart. We had a cabin by a lake for part of the time. That suited me. The woods there go on for miles, up north they go on for ever. And there are lakes, sheets of empty water, one leading into another, where you can travel for weeks and never see anything bigger than a fish or a bird. And there are mountains, ridges and peaks and valleys, growing wilder and lonelier until you come to the sea. But you need never come to the sea. You could lose yourself in the great black forests as easily as a flea in a bear's pelt."

She lifted her head and looked at the sitting-room as if she were seeing it for the first time. The close air was stirring as if a vast clean breath had blown into the room. The curtains swung in a thin air that came from high and lonely places. As he talked she was suddenly filled with a new longing for the empty spaces of the earth and a wide sky. The walls of the sitting-room retreated, became vague and misty and unreal. She shivered and crossed her arms on her breast.

"Even in the cities over there it would be easier," he said. "There the steel and concrete buildings go up to the sky and the streets are deep in between. The people hurry through the streets in one way

in the morning and stream back the other in the evening—like a wave or tide rising and falling by clockwork. It is the easiest thing in the world to lose yourself in those streets—I have done it and I know. No one cares, no one worries what you do. But here, where you can't move without hitting up against somebody, what chance have I got? The minute I step outside this house I'll stand out like a crow in a flock of sparrows."

She could think of nothing to say and he threw himself into the armchair again and stared into the fire. "I can't see the end of all this," he said. "That's what is getting me down. I keep asking myself what the end of all this is going to be and I don't know."

"Of course you don't know," she said. "No one knows how anything is going to end. We plan and hope and set things going the way we hope they will go. The end we have to leave to take care of itself."

'And even that much we don't do successfully,' she thought. 'Our plans have a way of turning on themselves until they are the opposite of what we intended. Take myself, for instance. That first evening when I came to the house and shut the door on the fields, I planned to finish with adventure, or, if that is too strong a word for me, with hoping and with trying. I planned to turn my back on living, to hide myself in a safe and lonely peace. And now—see what that plan has led to! All the colour and action that should have been spread over the years of my life has been piled into one week. No wonder that the colour is strident and unlikely or that it dazzles me.' She sighed and looked across the hearthrug again. 'Yes,' she thought, 'our careful, cherished, dangerous plans fly out and round and come home to roost. Our air is thick with the deadly little things.'

He pulled his chair forward until their knees were nearly touching. The firelight fell directly on his face, making it look newly exposed and raw; even the whites of his eyes shone redly and the

strong flickering shadows seemed to set the whole head twitching and moving painfully. He put out his hand and touched her knee.

"My luck's gone for good," he said hoarsely. "I'm not going to get away from here."

The room behind her was growing dim as if an invisible hand were slowly turning down the lamp. She found that she could not turn her head to look over her shoulder, but she knew that the walls were retreating, were slowly but certainly stepping back into the darkness. Now in the room, hanging about them like a cloud, was the familiar emanation, the cold and musty smell of fear. She did not know how long they sat there, staring into each other's face with fear flowing between them like a cold wave, but when at last she moved and put her hand over his she knew that their two hands clasped together on her knee were numb and stiff with the same dread.

"This won't do," she said suddenly. "We can't sit here as if everything were over. I'm not going to let it end this way."

She turned her head with a quick defiant movement and looked at the room. And there was the room as it had always been. The lamp shone serenely behind its shade; the curtains stood guard across the windows; the four safe walls still held them in their warmed and narrow space.

"We mustn't be foolish," she said. "Look, nothing has changed."

When she looked at his face again she saw that the black eyes were still opaque—she did not know if they saw her at all. His head and shoulders were set in a stiff uncomprehending mould of fear. "Listen to me," she said loudly. "To-morrow everything will seem different. To-morrow we will make a new set of plans. Everything is going to be all right. You wait and see, your luck will still hold—it wouldn't have brought you as far as this for nothing. But the night is not the time for planning. Nothing seems

as it really is in the night. All the fears come out of their holes then and stand around looking enormous."

She expected him to pull his hand away and to turn on her impatiently, but to her surprise he only leaned a little closer until their faces were almost touching. After a moment she went on talking in the same dreamy sing-song voice, saying her thoughts out loud as they came into her head.

"When I was a child I was afraid of the dark and so were you," she said. "We are still afraid of the night. Why are we always so afraid? The worst that can happen to us is death and, after all, what is that? We managed to be born, and for all we know, that was as terrifying as to die. Think how warm and safe we were in the womb, how cosily curled and held. I am sure that I, for one, stayed there as long as I could and that when at last I had to leave that warm place to face the light, I came out as reluctantly as I could. Think what a shock it must be to be born. But we have survived it."

She looked away from him at the fire and said in a low voice: "Yes, birth must be as terrifying as death. Perhaps it is the same thing."

She thought that he had not heard a word she said, but he pulled his hand roughly away and said loudly:

"Be quiet! You don't know what you are saying."

"I don't see why not," she said. "It could be a sudden bursting out into a light we had never even imagined before. And the not remembering a thing about it afterwards, that could be the same. It could be as simple as that. Why not?"

"Because it's not like that," he said. "I know——"

Now she saw that his face, turned away from the light of the flames, was grey. The eyes looked enormous in their rings of shadow. As she stared at him the sweat started out on his forehead and she cried, "No—no! Don't look like that, I can't bear it."

"You mustn't look like that," she said more calmly. "You mustn't

be so afraid. After all, we can't get away from it or avoid it any more than we could avoid being born. It is always here. It is a part of every day. We must grow as used to it as we do to the sky. Yes, death is always over us. It is our sky."

He tried to speak. His lips formed the rough shape of the words, but no sound came. She watched the pale lips fumbling and jerking until she could not bear to look at them any longer. She pushed her chair back, but before she could go to him and put her arms round him as she meant to do, he threw himself on his knees beside her and hid his face in her lap.

She looked fiercely round the room and covered his head with her arms as if, by that simple protecting movement, she could prevent the darkness from spreading into their lamplit circle and forbid the night to advance by so much as one moment or the next day to come.

"Don't think about it any more," she whispered. "Don't think of anything. We are together. I have you safely under my arms. Nothing can happen while you are with me. I won't let it happen."

Now she spoke in a whisper, murmuring words that she did not herself understand above his head—broken words and phrases that she might have used to a child. After a while she felt the tenseness go out of his shoulders and arms. Now his hand was groping, fumbling at the neck of her dress. She put her own hand over it and pressed it between her breasts. She felt it lying there as cold as a stone. Now he lay against her knees as if he were abandoning himself to a wave, letting himself drift out, almost without knowing it, on a great smooth swinging wave into calm water. Now his hand was warm; it lay for a moment where it was, warmly curled like a small animal in its sleeping-place. Then it moved with a new urgency. When he lifted his head and looked at her as if he had asked her a question, she stood up at once and led the way upstairs.

VII

Edwina woke in the night and started up in bed. The room was dark; she could see only the square of the window and a glimmer across the room where the dressing-table stood, and it was completely still. There was no sound to be heard but, as she sat up, staring into the darkness, she still heard the sound of moving water, a great sigh and hush, as if somewhere a giant wave had risen, arched into an irresistible foaming crest, advanced, fell, broke and drained away, sighing as it went.

'I have been dreaming,' she thought. 'Something about a huge wave, a seventh wave.'

The house still echoed. The fluted corridors and spirals of the shell were washed clean and scoured by the surge of water and left empty, shiningly empty and bare, but filled for ever after with the remembrance of the sea. 'Of course,' she thought, half asleep, 'the shell, the wave and the shell,' but she could not remember her dream; it had gone, and all that was left of it was the sound of the sea, which she now heard below her window.

The room was cold with a new dry starry coldness. Her face and neck burned and, as she turned her face towards the window, she felt her hair rise from her bare shoulders and spread out against the wooden headrest of the bed. She shivered and thought, 'There will be a frost to-morrow. The mist is streaming away from the window and soon the night sky will show through.' She opened her eyes wide in the darkness, but the warm nest of the bed was waiting for her and she could not wait to see the first star show.

She turned on her side and put her arms out across the bed above the blankets as if he had not left her hours ago, padding silently on bare feet to his own bed across the landing. As she shut her eyes the house closed in about her; became small and compact and round.

Here it was, curled warmly round her in the shape of a nest. Here was the nest swinging high in the branches of the night. Here was the filled shell turning slowly with the wave.

'This is as it should be—nothing else matters,' she thought, sleepily. 'The shell must be filled, the womb ripe, the eggs safely swinging beneath warm feathers, the seed laid under the earth, the fruit swelling on the branches. For each one of us the whole round world at some time narrows to the shape of home. And the idea behind the home is the family: for this the twigs are gathered and the straws; the bricks are slowly raised up one by one; the stone slabs are carved; the hole is dug deep in the ground; the airy architecture of the sunbird's nest is planned. Wood, mud, concrete, rubble, straw—all are used to one end—that the home shall hold the family. "And here," she whispered, touching the place where his head had lain, "here, under my hand is my family, my home—all that I shall ever have. What more could I ask? The shell is full. No tide can harm me."

The curtains swung gently and now the sound of the sea breaking on the rocks below the house was louder in the room; listening to it she smiled and fell asleep.

PART
FIVE

THE HALL WAS WHITE WITH SUNSHINE THAT STREAMED THROUGH the landing window and down the stairs and spread out in a pool on the floor. Every corner was flooded with the clear strong light; the walls shone, the empty niche above the door glowed like a pearl, waves of light flowed across the ceiling, and the colours of the Persian rug moved like seaweed in a shallow pool. The window and the doors were shut, but the hall was filled with the sound of the sea; a low booming and a muted roar beat against the walls, not from outside the house, but as if invisible waves were rising and falling in the hall. The white walls sent the sound back again and caught the echo of falling spray and the suck of water pulling at the shingle. Somewhere in the house a door slammed and a salt current of air circled the echoing walls and set the pale colours and the bright reflections swaying. When the dog came silently down the stairs and slid into the hall he might have been a black seal sliding into deep water. As he crossed the floor the sunlight fell directly on to his back and touched it momentarily to a shining blue.

The kitchen door opened. A voice said, "Isn't it a treat to see the sun? There was a heavy frost early this morning, but now it looks almost warm enough for a bathe."

Edwina walked into the hall and stood in the centre of the pool of sunshine, looking up the stairs at the window. "To-day, the hall is the warmest part of the house," she said, raising her voice so that it could be heard in the kitchen. "Ross, why don't you open the front door and sit on the step in the sunshine? It would do you good. No one will see you there."

When she turned her head and saw that he had followed her into the hall, leaving the cup of tea she had just made for him on the table, she sighed and clenched her hand in the pocket of her overall. Ever since she had woken out of a deep sleep that morning to see him standing in the sunshine at her window, he had followed her everywhere she went. All day he had trailed behind her from room to room, saying nothing, but standing close behind her, or leaning against a door frame or a chair, watching her. When she had spoken to him he had not answered except by a shrug of the shoulders. She had tried not to take any notice of him, but after a time his silent presence behind her had begun to get on her nerves. Whenever she had looked up from her work to see him watching her with the same brooding stare she had felt herself growing clumsy and uneasy again. "What is the matter with you?" she had said at last. "Are you afraid to be left alone?" That had been a mistake. He had looked at her then as if she were someone he had never seen before and did not want to see again, before he walked out of the room—the bedroom she was dusting—slamming the door behind him. And that had not ended it; almost at once he had come back to lean against the door as he had done before and, as she went past him to the landing, he had caught hold of her hand and had held it for a moment, crushing the fingers until she had cried out with surprise and pain. What she had expected him to do then she did not know, but when all he said was, "Make me a cup of tea, will you; I could do with it?" she had felt that was making a fool of her. She had felt in some way disappointed.

Now, there he was again, leaning against the door behind her. He was wearing the yellow sweater under the brown coat, although it was warm in the hall. She saw that he had not bothered to shave and that the fingers holding the cigarette were stained a yellow-brown. When he lifted his head and stared at her she saw that his eyes were bloodshot and ringed with shadow as dark as a bruise.

'I have never seen him look like this before,' she thought. 'He looks disreputable, dull and shoddy, a nasty bit of work. I wouldn't be surprised to see him turn his head and spit on the hall floor.'

She turned her back on him and opened the front door. The clean salt air poured over her and past her into the house. There were the fields sloping to the cliff, and beyond the fields the open sea. The sunlight hurt her eyes, and, as she put her hand up to shield them and felt the sun warm on her unaccustomed skin, she thought that she must look like some weak pale creature that had just emerged into the light from a chrysalis, a burrow, or from under a stone.

"We have been shut away into the house for too long," she said, and he answered from close behind her: "Yes, and now I'm going out."

He was standing behind her looking over her shoulder through the open door. She turned her head and their faces were almost touching. She could see every hair in the strong sloping eyebrows and the heavy curve of the lashes, and she felt at her back, separated from her only by a thin skin of air, the hard youth of his body—warming her like a fire.

She turned round and put her hand on the yellow sweater, and there was his heart beating under the wool and under her hand. By chance she had put her hand directly over his heart; it beat quickly a little unevenly, stammering a little under her fingers and, feeling it there, alive, terribly alive in its uneven restless beating, terribly anxious and afraid, she knew that whatever aspect of himself he showed her it would make no difference, no difference to her at all. 'This, not at any time last night, is our most intimate moment,' she thought. 'We will never be closer than we are now,' and when he stepped back from her hand she was not offended or hurt. 'Let him go,' she thought. 'I will always have him now.'

He pushed past her on to the step and, as she had done, put his

hand up to his eyes. "There's no one out there," he said. "No harm if I stretch my legs a bit. I must get out. I must have some air."

"Go on then," she said. "There is nothing to stop you." As he limped down the steps, she could not help calling after him, "Be careful. There will be plenty of people out on the cliffs before long. This sun is sure to bring them up out of their burrows."

He stood still and looked round at the fields, hesitated, and then limped back up the steps again. "It's so darned open," he said angrily. "No trees, no cover. This is a darn fool-place to put a house."

"Stay in the house," she said. "After all, it's not for much longer—only until to-night or, rather, at dawn to-morrow. It would be a pity to spoil it now that we have it all planned."

He sat down on the step at her feet and leaned his head on his hands. "Yes, we have got it all planned, haven't we?" he said. "All cut and dried. Simple and easy. Sounds fine. The only thing is, it's not going to happen, not that way. I'm not going to get away from here as easily as all that."

"Why, Ross—what's the matter with you?" she said. "I was the one who was afraid. You were so sure about it. All you have to do is to walk out of the house with the suitcase. If you go very early in the morning no one will see you. Listen, while I say it all again. At the top of the hill where the road comes up from the Cove there is a clump of trees and a gate. You must wait there until you hear the bus. It leaves the Cove every other morning at eight o'clock, and if you step out and stop it there they will only think that you have come from one of the houses on the Cove side of the cliffs. If you were going to catch a train up to town, that is the way you would go—take the first bus into Weyford and then the 10.30 up—that is the way Madge went."

She looked down at him, at the crown of his black head and at the spread of shoulders by her knees. "It is strange that I should have to urge him to go when all I want is for him to stay here with

me,' she thought. 'He is the one who should be thinking of tomorrow and planning and hoping. My part is a passive one. All I have to do is to stay here and watch him go.' In her mind she saw him walking away from her over the fields in the growing light of early morning. There he went becoming smaller and dimmer, going away from her. She watched him vanish out of her life, but, as the bus disappeared over the hill, her sadness changed to a fierce joy. He had gone. They had won.

"Sounds easy, doesn't it?" he said. "As easy as kiss your hand. But what happens then? You don't know and I don't know. It's all to be left to luck after that. I'm thinking it will need to be the hell of a big slice of luck. You know as well as I do that it's no good."

She sat down on the step beside him and touched his arm. He shook her hand off and turned his head away from her.

"You can't give up now," she said. "I won't let you. If you do it will make everything much worse. I mean, those things you did—that girl—that man. It will all have been done for nothing. It will be nothing but a hideous waste. But if you get away to another country, somewhere larger, freer, where no one will know . . . You are young and strong. If you have a chance you could be anything. Who knows . . .? There is all the world."

He turned and looked at her with a cold ugly look as if he hated her. "You keep off that," he said. "How I came to spill it all to you I don't know. I would have done better to keep my mouth shut. There's no trusting any woman. I could have eased you along some other way. Now here you are, in it up to your neck, and what to do next I don't know. I don't know, but I have to do something or you'll let me down yet."

She saw that he was trying to work himself up into a rage he did not really feel. His eyes moved uneasily, looking at her hands, her feet, at the frame of the door, past her at the sea—anywhere except at her face.

"The trouble is that once you have started something you have to go on," he said, as if he were speaking more to himself than to her, but saying the words slowly and clearly as if he hoped that she would hear and understand them. "One thing leads to another. You can't help it. You have to go on even if you don't want to."

It was cold sitting on the steps in the morning sunshine. She shivered and folded her arms across her breast. Why had she thought the hall would be warmer with the front door open? It had been a mistake to let the sunshine and the sea air into the house—it was too early in the year—the day was cold, cold. His voice went on beside her, but now she knew that she did not want to listen. Why could he not sit quietly beside her enjoying the sunshine instead of bringing this cold draught into the hall and spoiling the little while they had left together? 'What is he saying now?' she thought. 'Something about Madge? What has Madge got to do with us now?'

"Did you write that letter to your friend like I told you to?" he said. "Did you say not to worry if she didn't hear from you for a while?"

"I wrote what you told me to yesterday evening," she said. "The letter has gone. Johnny took it this morning. What are you worrying about?"

"Nothing," he said quickly. "Why should I be worrying more than usual? Listen, just suppose I change my mind. Suppose you come with me to-morrow, just as far as Bristol, just to set me on my way."

She looked at him doubtfully. Something in his voice told her that he did not mean what he said, but she answered, "Of course, if you want me to."

Her voice sounded flat and uncertain, but that did not seem to disturb him. He went on in the same low hurried way, "Then you must write a note to the folks at the Farm. You must write that you

have been called away unexpectedly and won't be back for a couple of days. Yes, you must write another letter and leave it for the boy to find in the morning."

"Very well, if you think it best," she said, but she knew that he did not mean her to go with him in the morning. She knew that he meant her to stay behind him in the house while he went away from her. She wondered why he thought it necessary to pretend to her, but she did not mean to argue with him. Already the tone of his voice had changed as if he knew he had not deceived her. What was he trying to tell her now? She did not want to listen. It would be better, she knew, not to hear.

She leaned her head against the door frame and half shut her eyes until the colours of the fields and sea and sky were one band of colour across her eyelids, but she could not shut out the sound of his voice. He was trying to tell her something—suggesting, hinting something she ought to hear. It was something unpleasant, something she did not want to understand. She hunched her shoulders obstinately and turned her head away from him and tried not to listen. To hide the meaning of his words she thought of the house. She thought of each room in turn and of her precious belongings in each room. When she thought of the kitchen she knew that she was on safe ground and her mind eagerly began to plan what she would do that day with the remnants of food in the larder and the last tins on the shelves. Now she was absorbed in the comfortable everyday effort of planning and contriving. The cold left her arms and breast. The sun was warm on her hands again.

"I must go to the village this afternoon," she said, interrupting him suddenly without knowing what she was doing. "It will be impossible to manage with what we have. There is practically nothing in the house except milk and a little bread."

"Jesus!" he said. "Dear God Jesus!"

She heard the despair in his voice and looked up at him in

astonishment. He was standing over her on the steps shutting out the sky.

"What have I done?" she said. "What is the matter? Don't look at me like that."

He bent down and, putting his hand under her chin, turned her face roughly up to him. "Haven't you heard a word of what I have been saying?" he said.

She tried to shake her head but his fingers held her jaw with a cold hard grip. Tears came into her eyes, and now she could not see his face.

"Was there ever such a fool of a woman?" he asked in a voice that was almost a groan. "Such a stupid, soft, helpless fool? You don't deserve a chance."

The fingers closed on the soft flesh of her cheeks until she cried out with pain, and then moved for a second over her face and hair in a quick rough caress. As he straightened himself again and turned away she heard him say, "Forget it. Let it go. Reckon it's just as well."

She stood up slowly and put her hand to her cheek. Never before had he given her a sign of tenderness. As she watched him cross the hall to the stairs she wanted to cry, "Oh Ross, Ross—that one brief touch has made it all worth while for me—that has made up for everything." But out of her new warm confused happiness, all she could do was to say stupidly, "Then I can go to the village after all?"

With his foot on the first step of the stairs, he turned and looked at her. "You stay where I tell you," he said. "You are not going to the village or anywhere else."

"But we have got to eat," she said, coming after him. "Surely you can spare me for one hour?" The hot colour came over her neck and face as she looked up at him.

"Don't let me catch you trying to leave this house," he said heavily. "You stay right here."

As he began to walk slowly up the stairs she called after him, "Where are you going? Your tea is in the kitchen."

Without turning his head he said loudly, "I'm going to my room. Leave me alone."

II

The sunlight had not penetrated to the kitchen; here everything was as it had always been: the Aga was holding its own comfortable heat, the dog was lying quietly in his basket, the close still air was undisturbed. Here was no hint, no suggestion of the restless currents in the hall. Edwina stood by the table in the centre of the room absently touching the cup of tea with the back of her fingers; the cup, of course, was cold. She frowned at the door of the empty larder. 'I have never heard such nonsense,' she thought. 'Naturally, I must go to the village.'

As she lifted the cup and slowly drank the cold tea, she told herself, 'He didn't really mean what he said. Who has heard of a kitchen without any food in it? Of what possible use is an empty larder? Men never worry about these details, but they are the first to grumble if a full meal isn't provided at the right time. If I know anything of him—and what by now do I not know—he will sulk in his room for an hour or two and then emerge for his midday meal as if nothing had happened.' She smiled at the kitchen in a knowing way.

"Of course I shall go to the village," she whispered, and she thought, 'All I have to do is to scrape together the best luncheon I can find for him and leave it here on the table, slip upstairs and into my coat, and then get myself silently out of the house and away. He won't hear me go if I am careful and he will welcome me back with open arms when I return with enough for a good supper. Yes, I must hurry. Even the kitchen says, "Get out of the house while you can."'

She began to move quickly and silently round the room, opening the cupboard doors, fetching a saucepan, running the tap, peeling and chopping potatoes, with a feverish uneasy haste, as if she were running a race against time. She did not know why she felt it necessary to make no noise, but she found that she was walking on tiptoe and setting the plates carefully down on the table as if the faintest sound might betray her. When the soup was ready in the Aga and the table laid with its solitary place, she opened the door and looked cautiously out into the hall. The staircase was empty and silent. "You had better come with me," she whispered to the dog, who had risen from his basket and was following her to the door. With the dog keeping close to her heels she ran across the hall and up the stairs, looking round her with exaggerated care as if they were playing a new sort of game.

As she tied the scarf round her neck she peered into the mirror of the dressing-table. There was her face, looking much as usual. The eyelids were red and the nose shone, but the lips were set in a new determined line. She picked up her lipstick and, using it as she had never done before, covered her mouth with strong red colour. As she laid the lipstick down she was seized again with the need to hurry. Now the blue reflected eyes were staring excitedly. She smoothed her hair and hurriedly powdered her face and saw, as she turned away from the glass, that the new big red mouth gave the patchily powdered face a foolish and somehow tragic look. 'I look like a clown,' she thought irritably, but now she could not wait.

She knew that she was breathing heavily as she put on her fawn coat. 'Where is my bag?' she thought distractedly. 'Have I got my ration book, money, latchkey? I am as nervous and excited as a girl about to elope. Why do I feel as if this were an escapade, an adventure, an escape?'

She pulled on her gloves and forced herself to stand for a moment in the middle of the room to compose herself a little before going

downstairs. 'I am quite ready,' she told herself. 'All I have to do is to pick up the dog's lead and my shopping bag from the kitchen and close the back door quietly behind me. When I am outside the house all will be well.'

The bedroom, in spite of the overall on the floor and the untidy dressing-table, looked unnecessarily calm and composed. It looked, with its quiet pale colours, its smooth bedspread, more matter of fact than it need have done. 'It is overdoing it as usual,' she thought. 'It is making me seem absurd.' But, as she looked at its white and shining shell-like walls, she felt as if she were seeing them for the last time.

"Why am I standing here?" she said. "I must hurry."

As she crossed the landing, carrying her shoes in her hand and walking as quietly as she could, she glanced towards his room. The door was safely shut and the stairs were bathed in the warm reassuring sunlight. Her spirits rose as the dog, with waving tail and his black hair rising on his spine, ran silently before her across the hall, through the kitchen, and out of the back door.

III

In the fields it was warmer than it had been in the house. There was not a breath of wind. The fields stretched smoothly to the edge of the cliffs and beyond the cliffs the sea was a shining light unruffled blue; on the horizon lay a broken line of clouds. The sun was drawing the moisture of the last days out of the earth and the fine shimmering vapour rising from the ground softened the hard lines of the stone walls and made the rocks and the nearer gorse bushes look further off than they really were. Out of sight in the blue hazy sky a lark was singing. The salt air carried the wild damp scents of spring.

Edwina opened her coat and let it swing wide behind her as she walked across the fields to the stile. The sun was warm on her hair, the strong astringent air flowed under her armpits and through the thin stuff of her blouse until her skin began to glow and tingle. 'I feel as if I had just come out of a cold bath,' she thought. 'I feel invigorated and made new. I would like to run across the fields shouting and singing with the dog beside me. I feel as if I had been let out of prison. We have been shut away into the house for too long.'

When she reached the stile she turned round and looked back at the house. It looked far away, separated from her by more than a few small fields. She could see no details, but the whole low shape of the house with the garage jutting out at one side had a solid and purposeful look. From the stile it was the only house to be seen on all that coast and against the soft colours and rounded slopes of the fields it looked out of place, something that did not belong to the warm curving earth; and it looked heavy, filled to the brim with a dark coiled life. It seemed to her that it was clinging to the slope of the fields as if it were afraid of sliding off into the sea. She had never noticed before that the grey roof was like a hat drawn low over a stern white brow. "But it is a stern weary business looking into the wind," she said aloud. "No wonder the shine has worn off the walls a bit."

'What is he doing, down there in the house?' she wondered, and looked at her watch. 'It is one o'clock. At this moment he is sure to be opening his door and looking out on to the landing—perhaps he is calling for me. Now he is limping slowly down the stairs with his head bent and one hand on the banisters and the other holding a cigarette. I can see him plainly: the blue curl of smoke from the cigarette drifts across the yellow sweater and behind him up the stairs. Now he is in the hall, glancing into the sitting-room to see if I am there, going on into the kitchen. He has put on his jaunty

careless look, to show me that he is quite at ease after our quarrel, the defiant swagger that makes me see that the shoulders of his coat are too square, that makes him look a small town tough. Or else he is silently opening the kitchen door and advancing into the room in the slow and deadly way he sometimes has—his face sombre, serious and dark—looking enormous, looking dangerous. No, I am sure that is wrong. To-day, as he advances into the kitchen and sees that I am not there, I am sure that there is another expression on his face. Now I can't see him clearly. I can't picture his face, but is it fear?

She hesitated by the stile, but the fields behind the house were still empty. 'It is a fine afternoon,' she told herself. 'Later there will be a few people about in the fields. It is Sunday afternoon and the path along the cliffs is a favourite walk, but what harm can they do to the house? I mustn't be foolish, it won't hurt him to be left alone for a little while. The best thing I can do is to hurry down to the village and get back as soon as I can.'

'If only the house didn't look so exposed and cut off,' she thought, as she crossed the stile and took the short cut over the field to the lane.

Her hand was on the gate before she saw that there was someone standing in the lane in the shadow of the hedge. She stopped short, but it was only the girl Flora. Against the mild sweet colours of the new leaves in the hedge the girl looked as alien and startling as a strayed peacock would have done. The red curls shone; under the grey coat was a dress of a harsh and vivid blue; the stockings on the thin straight legs were the colour of warm flesh and the high black heels were like daggers or like spurs. 'Here is someone else who has given up her midday meal for more important business,' she thought. 'What is she doing? The chit is got up to kill.'

She drew back quickly and, keeping behind the bank, peered over it at the girl. 'I know what Flora is thinking as she waits there,'

she thought. 'As I watch her smile to herself and smooth the lapels of her coat and turn her head on its long neck to look down the lane expectantly, I know what is in her mind. But now it is nothing to me who she goes with to the ditch behind the hedge, the clump of trees, the cover of the gorse bushes. I can smile, even if it is a little scornfully, and say, "Good luck to her!"

She stood for a moment in the shadow of the bank, looking down at the ground and smiling to herself. 'What shall I do now?' she thought. 'I can't go down the lane. I must find another way to the village.'

'What a lot of time and thought I have wasted on that girl,' she told herself. 'What a power I gave her in my jealous thoughts. How silly I was—I know now that the evil I saw in her was in my own mind, in my empty heart.'

As she turned her back on the gate and walked along the field, following the line of the hedge, she thought, 'How dark and clouded the mind of a lonely woman can be. How disgusting, how full of twisted passions and fancies. Is there no limit to the evil that the unhappy empty mind of an ageing woman can hold?'

She lifted her head and looked at the sea. "But now all that is changed," she said aloud. "I am a different person. At this moment I feel extraordinarily clean and clear. I feel as if an ugly cataract of fear and loneliness had been peeled from my eyes. How clearly I see and understand myself."

Now it seemed to her that she saw even the familiar fields, even the leaves in the hedge, as she had never done before. "How light and clear I feel," she said. "Everything is bright and hard in my mind. I see a great deal that I didn't see before. I feel as if I were standing on a high place looking down at a country where, a short time ago, I was walking along between high hedges. I understand not only myself. Why, I understand everything!"

She turned her head and looked at the distant house. As she saw

the line of the roof, sharp against the sea, she suddenly stood still and put her hands up to her heart.

"I see," she said slowly. "I see it all. Now I know what he wanted to tell me, back there in the hall when I wouldn't listen to him. I know too much. How could he go and leave me alive in the house behind him?"

"Not alive," she whispered, looking over her shoulder at the peaceful fields. "Of course—not alive. I would have to be dead. Dead like the others"

She began to run across the fields away from the house, stumbling over the tussocky grass and dragging her coat across the spines of the gorse bushes. She covered the ground with long uncertain strides, not knowing where she was going, but keeping a straight line as if she were following a path parallel to the cliffs. Her face was flaming and her eyes stung as they would have done after staring into a bright light.

At last she stopped, gasping for breath. The gold fields and cliff and sky, that had been streaming past her over her shoulder, steadied and became one fixed definite scene.

On her left the cliffs continued beside the sea; there was the bold scarred face of the headland, but she was seeing it from a new angle and the land round her was strange. The fields, divided by their stone walls, were gone, and here, stretching away from her as far as she could see, was open moor with grey piled rocks and scattered gorse bushes. 'I have come a long way without realizing it,' she thought. 'The warmth has gone from the afternoon. There are only a few hours left before the sun sets.' She shivered and tears came into her eyes.

'What am I to do now? What can I do?' she asked herself.

She stood still, looking across the fields to the sea while her hands folded and refolded the scarf round her neck. It seemed to her that the air hummed and shook with the sound of bells. The high silver

beating and calling was now near and then far off, rising and falling round her like the waves of the sea. 'It is Sunday,' she thought vaguely, but the bells were ringing, not from the towers of churches hidden in the folds of the land, but in her head. She turned slowly and faced the way she had come.

"I must go back to the house," she said slowly. "That is what I must do."

Her voice sounded strange to her and her lips moved stiffly, but now the ringing died away, leaving one last note that seemed to her to persist on the air, clear and sweet, for a long time.

As she began to walk slowly over the grass between the gorse bushes she said, "He must get safely away—that is all that matters—that will make everything worth while. Perhaps this is the best ending after all."

Something was moving on the broken ground between the gorse bushes and the sea. Her heart leapt, but it was only the dog. 'I had forgotten him,' she thought. 'He is too near the cliffs. That is dangerous.'

Suddenly she began to run and, as she ran, she thought, 'What will Ross do when he finds that I have left the house? What will he think? I have spoilt everything. Why did I leave the house? Who knows what the end will be now?'

She pulled the glove back from her wrist and looked at her watch. 'Perhaps there is still time,' she told herself. 'He may not have missed me yet, but it is past three. I must have walked for miles without knowing it. I must hurry, hurry.'

But after a few yards she found that she had to slow down to a walk. The ground rose before her in a gradual slope. The long grass caught at her ankles, her heart was pounding and she could not breathe. Never before had she found her body so heavy and cumbersome.

"I must hurry," she said, over and over again. "I must go faster

than this," and then she broke into a run for a few steps. Her hair was coming down, but she could not stop to pin it up. Her coat caught on the bushes and her tweed skirt bunched between her knees. As she pulled at the scarf round her neck she thought, 'I should like to strip my clothes off one by one and drop them behind me and grow lighter and freer at each step.' She pulled the scarf off her neck and stuffed it into her pocket. 'That's better,' she thought, feeling a cool breeze on her bare throat, 'now I can go a little faster,' but, as she hurried up the slope in front of her, she knew that she could not keep up such a pace for long.

'I am too heavy,' she thought, despairingly. 'My legs are big and strong, but they have to support the rest of my body, these thighs, my great breasts. I hate my body. It is my soft woman's body that has led me into this trap.' As she began to run again she could feel her breasts shaking under her blouse. 'With the Amazons,' she thought confusedly, 'it was the custom to cut one off the better to use the bow.' "How disgusting is a woman's body," she sobbed, feeling her thighs rubbing against each other as she tried to lengthen her stride. "Oh, to be as firm and straight as a boy. Oh to be an arrangement of steel-hard, feather-light bones—shaped for speed, like a bird!"

At last she had reached the top of the slope. There was the high curving bank of the lane and the line of its hedges, the familiar fields and, still far away but distinct on the green landscape, the white dot of the house.

She breathed more easily as she saw the house. Now she could allow herself to walk at a reasonable pace and to put up her hand to feel for the loose pins in her hair. 'There it is,' she thought. 'There are the hiding walls. Once I am behind them I know that I shall never leave them alive again. That seems to me only a quiet and peaceful thought. How tired I am.'

Her eyes were full of tears but she brushed them away. She had

reached the field by the gate into the lane; here was the stile. Now across the fields she could see the house plainly below her.

The sunlight of late afternoon lay over fields and house; the white walls glowed; a thread of violet-coloured smoke rose straight into the air from the chimney. The haze had gone and in the clear thin air every detail of cliff and field stood out sharply. The shadow of the house lay on the field as if it had been painted there in violet paint. Beyond the sharp line of the cliffs the sea hung like a blue unmoving backcloth to the scene. Looking down on to the house was like looking at a stage set for a scene in a play.

As she stepped on to the stile she saw that the fields were no longer empty. Groups of people were walking on the grass and on the path at the edge of the cliffs. At that distance they looked like black dots and they did not alarm her. 'They are not really near the house,' she told herself. 'They are nothing to worry about. They are only there to give the scene movement.'

As she stood on the stile she no longer felt that she must hurry. The scene spread out before her looked unreal and far away in its thin bright colours. The house was the centre of the stage; it had a self-conscious cardboard air and round it the little figures moved in a small jerky way; she could not take them seriously. Even when a line of khaki-green dots appeared over the brow of the hill behind the house and advanced over the fields, she did not realize for a few moments that she was too late and that the play had been going on for some time.

She only thought, a little uneasily, 'I hope Ross doesn't look out of the window. What are those soldiers doing there? Is the Home Guard doing its Sunday exercises or are they the soldiers from the Cove?'

She could not take her eyes off the khaki line. Now it was level with the house. She saw it spread out and divide, like a wave meeting a rock. The little figures below her in the fields drew together and stood still to watch.

The soldiers were in a close circle round the house. She started forward but, as she moved, she saw a single figure leap out of the cover of the gorse bushes in front of the house and dart away across the fields.

For a second she did not know what it was. Then she saw a flash of yellow, the unmistakable yellow of the sweater. Even then she did not believe what she saw. "But he was in the house," she said aloud. "What is he doing hiding in the gorse bushes?" She stood where she was, watching that small far-away figure zigzagging over the fields towards the cliffs.

"He has lost his head—he doesn't know what he is doing," she said, and as she began to run she called to him. She thought that she was shouting, but all that came from her lips was a thin shrill cry. Now the soldiers had left the house and were running in a broken line towards the cliffs. Everyone was running, streaming over the fields towards the sea.

She ran down the fields to meet them. Now she had cut them off, she was in front of them. She was running with him on the cliff straight towards the sea. Now she could feel their breath on her neck. Her eyes started from her head. She knew the bursting heart, the terrible speed of the hunted.

A loud cry went up from the fields. She stopped running and put her hands over her ears. Now they were all past her, running silently.

She shut her eyes but she could not shut out the last sight of that small frantic figure, dark against the sea, with the arms thrown up to clutch at the sky. Now she, too, was falling, turning and falling, plunging down through the rushing air.

When she sat up on the cool grass and looked round, she was alone. She did not know how long she had been sitting there in the circle of the gorse bushes, but she thought that it must have been for a long time. There was no sound and no movement in the

bushes or the quiet curve of the sky. Even the air was still with a calm rapt stillness. The light falling into the space between the bushes was crystal clear; when she turned her head she saw the spires of the gorse above her outlined against the sky as clear and sure as truth.

'He has gone,' she thought, and the thought fell through the stillness like a stone.

Moving stiffly on to her knees, she looked over the fields to where a crowd was gathered at one spot on the edge of the cliffs. There was a coming and going in the fields, a busy and excited movement, and she knew that no time at all had passed. The hum of voices rose in her ears until she sank down on the grass and covered them with her hands.

As she crouched behind the bushes she began to weep. The tears fell as easily as rain. 'For whom am I weeping?' she asked herself through her tears. 'He has gone, and there is nothing left. He might have never been.' Now she knew that she had never seen him, not the man as he really was. 'Then what have I seen?' she asked herself. 'A mask, a blind? A tailor's dummy in a check overcoat, a cold and evil mind, a tired and driven man, a killer, a little boy dark and tender? Was he all or none of these?' She did not know. 'I shall never know,' she thought. 'I only know that he has gone and now I have nothing—for the rest of my life—nothing.'

A touch on her shoulder roused her. She sat up and saw that she was surrounded by people. As she put her hands over her face she heard voices speaking together, asking questions, confusing her. Between her fingers she could see khaki trousers moving in front of the gorse bushes, the butts of rifles and heavy boots. Out of the confusion of voices she heard one voice, as cold and as hard as a knife, speaking above her head.

"Is this the woman?" it said, and, looking up, she had a glimpse of

cold blue eyes under a flat cap brim and of a red moustache before she hid her face in her hands again.

"Pull yourself together," said the voice. "There are some questions I must ask you."

As she shook her head the voice went on, a little further off as if the face above her had drawn back with a look of distaste. "What a state the wretched woman is in. I will never get any sense out of her. Here you, Copely, take her to her house. I must see that they get after the body and I had better report this at once, but I'll be along in a moment or two. Don't you let her out of your sight and nothing in the house must be touched—understand?"

She heard them tramping off between the bushes and, lifting her head, she saw that she was alone with the young soldier.

Out of the troubled face the mild blue eyes looked down at her. "There, that's better," he said. "You dry your eyes and put your hair together like. The poor chap couldn't have felt anything. Gone he must have been as soon as he hit the sea."

He held out a big red hand to her and after a moment she took it and got to her feet.

Holding on to his warm hand she said earnestly, "It isn't out there. It isn't the wind and the sky. Not the sea. No, no, no, no—the world isn't guilty. It's here, here, inside us. It's part of us, part of all of us. It's here." She hit her chest with her clenched hand and began to weep again. "Don't you see?" she said to him. "It's our fault. We clutch and snatch and struggle to keep all we have. That is asking for trouble, that is dangerous. No, it doesn't come from outside us. It comes from here, from within." She moved her hands violently as if she were trying to tear something out of her breast.

"Now, now," he said gently, "there's no call to get excited. It's over. There's nothing more to do. Look, everyone has gone. It's finished. You come home."

"Finished!" she said distractedly. "It will never be finished," but she let him lead her between the gorse bushes and over the fields to the house.

"There is the house," she said, holding on to his arm and stumbling over the rough grass. "It looks solid and whole, doesn't it? But don't you believe it—those walls are an illusion—they keep nothing out. Poor snails, poor silly happy snails—someone should tell them how dangerous a shell can be. How should they know? Who would think it? A shell seems the very shape of safety. Look at the house, such a little house, one little space out of all the earth. You wouldn't think that it was too much to ask, would you? Surely everybody needs their own place, somewhere to be safe and warm and alone? No, no, no—that can't be what is wrong."

She looked up into his face as if she had asked him a question. It was very important. The words poured out but they could not make him understand what she was trying to say; her words had no sound.

"What is wrong?" she cried to him silently. "Where was the wrong turning? Is it just the putting of the hands round a space, or round a stone or a flame, and saying, 'Mine, my own?' Is it in the burrowing into the earth to get away from the wind? Then is it dangerous to have and still more dangerous to be safe? Between you and me, can that really be the answer?"

She shook his arm, but he only walked steadily on towards the house, looking neither to right or left. "Answer me," she cried. "Don't you see that this is very important?"

"See here," said the soldier. "You take it easy. It won't help to talk wild. Look, there's your little dog waiting for you at your gate. He will be company for you to-night. There's no being lonely, I always say, with a dog around."

She began to laugh. "How good you are," she said. "How good and how stupid!"

He opened the gate for her. She walked slowly up the path to the front door and heard him coming after her. His hand was on her arm and now his blue eyes were looking down at her with their clear gaze.

"See here, Miss," he said. "You go straight in and sit down and try to pull yourself together. The Captain will soon be here and you will want to do the best for yourself you can."

He looked quickly over his shoulder at the fields and, as she stood still on the path and stared at him, he put his hand out and touched her arm gently again. "See here now," he said. "It was me that told them. I couldn't do otherhow, now could I? Seeing how it was posted up who he was and what he had done and we all told to be looking out for him. They were on to him from the first, from all accounts. It would have come to the same thing. No, it wouldn't have been right, I had to tell them."

She saw that his face was red and troubled. "I went back yesterday afternoon after I knew," he said, "and thought it all out. I had to tell them, although I didn't want to. I told them this morning. The Captain, he fair ticked me off for not letting on sooner, but I made out as how I had only just put two and two together."

"How did you know?" she whispered. "What did you see that afternoon?"

"Oh well," he said, looking away from her. "First there was a packet of cigarettes lying there on the kitchen dresser. Chesterfields they was, and you said you didn't smoke. Then, in the hall, you were that jumpy and nervous like, and there was a feeling. I didn't like the house. Funny, but I couldn't seem to stand it—it felt bad. But it was when you were all talking—something about that hollow place in the wall—that I saw the door into the garage move. It moved as if something had leaned on it."

"Was that all?" she whispered. "Surely, it wasn't only that?"

"Oh, no," he said quickly. "There was more to it than that. When

I got out of the house I slipped round to the back and looked in at the garage window, careful like, and saw him standing there, listening at the door, plain enough. Then I remembered the day in the shop and what you said and how you looked, and I knew."

She put her hands over her eyes and he said warningly, "Now don't you take on. I did the best for you I could. There we were, round the house, but when I heard a shout go up and saw them all after him to the cliffs, I put the butt of my rifle through the window—smashed it up properly. You let them think that he got out that way. Then I nipped in through the window. There was no one left to see what I did. I locked the door into the hall and took the key away."

"But what was he doing outside in the bushes?" she said. "When he found that I had left the house he must have thought that I had gone for help. Why didn't he go while he had the chance? Why did he wait there?"

"We found a suitcase and a coat and hat hidden up in the gorse," the soldier said slowly. "If he hadn't lost his head and run like that we might never have seen him. But see here, Miss, don't you say anything more. The less I know the better."

As if he had not spoken she said, "I see it now. He packed. He cleared up everything to make it look as if he had never been in the house, to hide his tracks. Yes, he would do that. And then he wasn't sure. Perhaps he thought that I might have only gone to the village after all, that it might yet turn out as he had planned. Yes, he wanted to see what I would do. He got everything ready, he was going, and then he thought he would wait to see if I came back alone." She shivered and took his large hand in hers and held on to it as if it gave her strength.

"Now, you pull yourself together," he said. "You must think out what you are going to say." He held the key out to her. "Shall I keep it?" he said. "They will think he had it on him. Don't you worry about their finding him—they'll never find him—I know this

coast. You just stick to it that he was there in your garage and that you never knew it. That's the best you can do."

He put his hand under her arm and helped her up the steps. "You come into the hall," he said, "and sit down and rest. Look your dog's running in in front of us; he's waiting for us. But I'm right glad to to know that whatever happens your friend will be with you before long."

"Madge?" she said, staring at him. "What do you mean?"

"I hadn't told her anything, of course," he said, "but yesterday, when the three of us were walking back from the house to the village, Mrs. Buse said, 'I don't like it. I don't like the look of her at all. I'm wiring for Miss Selby to come. A promise is a promise.' Your friend will be a comfort to you. You won't be alone."

She turned away from him and, leaning on the banisters, began to laugh again.

"Hush!" he said warningly. "They are coming. I can see them in the fields. You sit down quiet like."

She sat down on the bottom step of the stairs. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered, looking up at him. "You are taking a great risk. Why are you helping me?"

"I'm not doing so much," he said hurriedly. "It will be difficult enough. I'm only giving you a chance."

"But why?" she said. "I'm nothing to you."

"Oh well," he said, moving his feet uneasily on the stone floor. "I was sad for you that day in the shop. It's not so easy being a woman, I reckon. A woman that's getting on. It seems to me like, that everyone has reason enough for the things they do. Oh, well—I don't know."

Tears came into her eyes as she looked up at him. He went to the door and looked out across the fields.

"Here they come," he whispered. "Here's the Captain and the rest of them. You just do the best you can."

IV

The sky above the fields was still blue, but towards the West, above the sea, it was now yellow and barred with dark purple clouds. The house on the cliffs was dark and still. The last sound of tramping feet had died away long ago. From the fields the house looked empty and shut and deserted.

The front door swung open. Edwina slipped out of the dark hall and sat down on the steps, leaning her head on her hands. Behind her the staircase was in deep shadow, but on the landing, below the window, it was still twilight. She could hear the dog moving uneasily in his basket under the kitchen table, and then she heard only the silence in the house.

‘They have gone,’ she thought. ‘I did the best I could. How little there was left of him in the house—he might have never been here.’

“Is this all the mark we leave on the world?” she whispered. “Only a few things packed away, a little dust and ash, a litter of old paper and shavings, an impression on the cushion of a chair? If we could come back we wouldn’t be able to find the place where we had been.”

She sighed and crossed her arms on her knees and put her head down on her hands. ‘How tired I am,’ she thought. ‘It seemed as if they would never be done with their questions. What they will do with me, I don’t know.’

She did not know how long she sat there but when she lifted her head the sunset colours were fading from the sky and the bank of clouds had risen until they reached far over the house. She could not see where the cliffs ended and the sea began; field, cliff, sea and sky, were sinking under the tide of night; only in the West and immediately above the sea, a few streaks of fiery angry red persisted.

‘To-morrow there will be rain again,’ she thought, leaning her head against the wall of the house.

‘To-morrow?’ she thought. ‘Yes, to-night will come and then the day. Whether we like it or not there will always be to-morrow with its rain or sun or wind.’

‘What will happen to me to-morrow?’ she asked herself. ‘They will be back to-morrow to start their questions again. Nothing is decided. For all I know they have left a guard on the house. Who knows what will happen or what they will do to me? Shall I be here to-morrow?’

Now she was too tired to be afraid but she knew that she did not want to go into the house again. She would rather pass the night in the fields than in the dark and silent house. ‘But they have gone,’ she thought. ‘For the moment I am safe. Even Madge can’t get here before to-morrow—I still have to-night. I must go into the house. I will light the lamps and the fire in the sitting-room. I will draw the curtains across the windows. The light will shine on my gold curtains and the old furniture that my father knew will comfort me. I will lock the door and sit with my dog and my belongings gathered close round me. I will shut my ears to the wind outside. The house will slowly become itself again. For the moment, at any rate, I still have the house.’

“What is wrong with that?” she said aloud. “So much has gone. Surely I may hope to keep what I have?”

She stood up and went into the house. Standing in the centre of the hall, she looked up the stairs. The silence that met her was as cold and final as the silence of the grave. The landing window was a pale square but darkness lay on the stairs and filled the space of the rooms. It was a cold heavy darkness, musty and smelling of decay. The house was completely silent and still. “I must let some air into the house,” she said suddenly.

The landing window was stiff, as if it had not been opened for a

long time, but she pulled at the catch until it gave and the window swung outwards. The cold air swirled in through the open space and down the stairs.

"That's better," she said, listening to the wind moving in the house.

She went into each room, followed by the dog, opening the windows wide and drawing the curtains back. The house was stirring round her; she heard a rustling and moving; the stairs creaked; a door slammed. She opened the last window in the sitting-room and heard the curtains swaying and the picture frames stirring on the wall. Now all the doors and windows in the house were wide open. It seemed to her that the house was alive again.

"I must say good-bye to the house," she whispered. "I must let it go. I must let everything go."

In the gathering darkness she went quickly through the house, looking at each room as if she were seeing it for the last time. She could hear the wind pouring into the house. Her hair was moving on her head and the wind caught her clothes and set them swirling round her. She felt light and free, as if, at any moment, she would be caught up and swept by the wind far out into the night. "This is better, much better," she said again, as she ran down the stairs and into the dark hall and stood there, listening. The wind swept through the open door, flowing under her outstretched arms and past her up the stairs. Now there was nothing to be heard in the house except the wind.

Edwina stood on the steps with the dog beside her, looking through the open door into the dark hall and listening to the wind moving in the echoing house. She could hear the curtains sailing into the rooms, the carpet lifting on the stairs. The wind filled the house, carrying with it the sounds of the sea, the black waves of night.

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